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THE WORKS OF
G. J. WHYTE-MELVILLE

EDITED BY

SIR HERBERT MAXWELL, BART.

VOLUME XXIII.

GOOD FOR NOTHING





M. B. R. O. K.

Ada Letimer.

GOOD FOR NOTHING

OR

ALL DOWN HILL

BY

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J. Whyte-Melville*
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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY H. M. BROCK

LONDON

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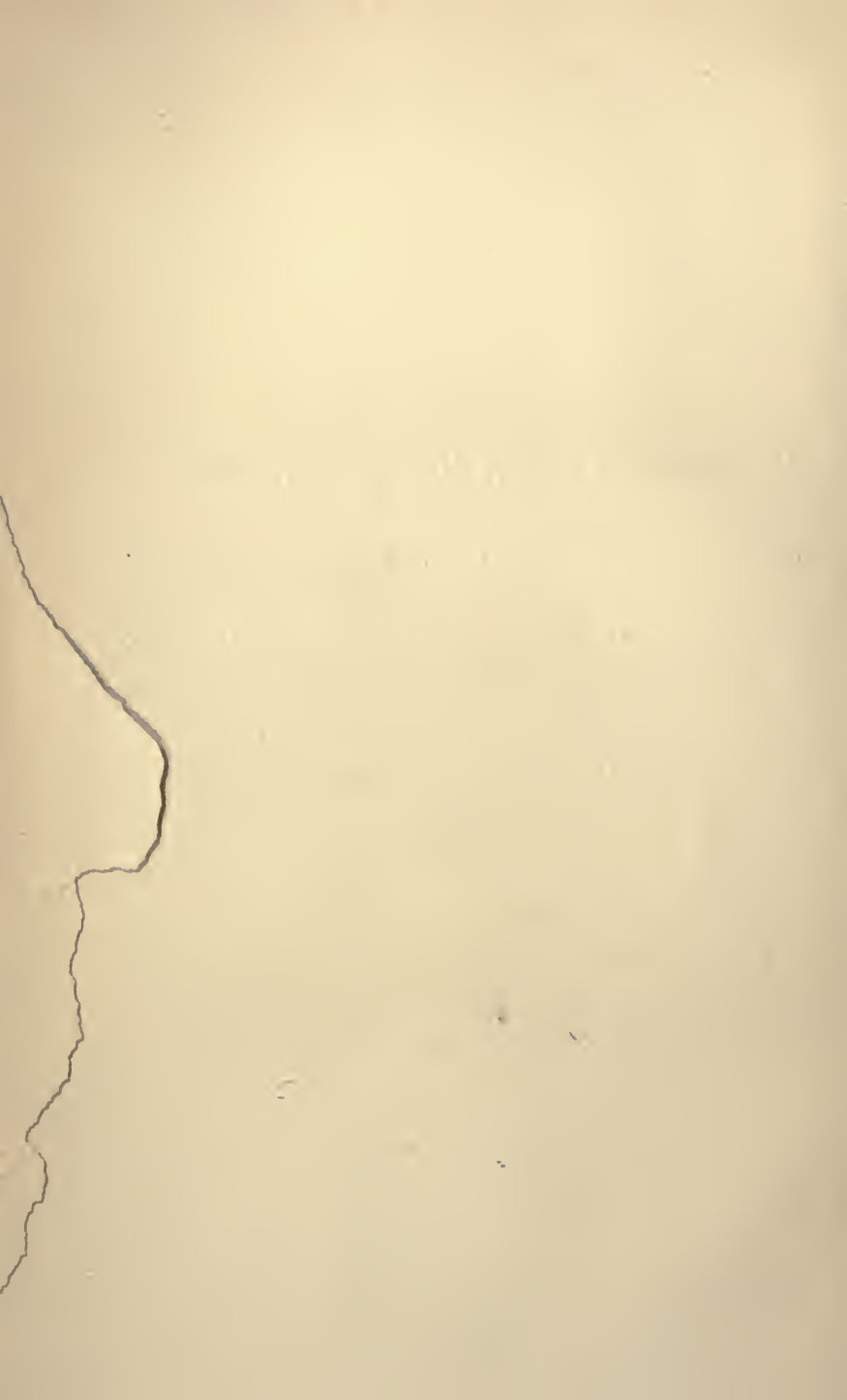
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GOOD FOR NOTHING



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OR

ALL DOWN HILL

Part I

23
“Fair laughs the morn, and soft the zephyr blows,
While proudly gliding, o’er the azure realm,
In gilded trim the gallant vessel goes,
Youth at the prow, and Pleasure at the helm,
Regardless of the sweeping whirlwind’s sway,
That, hush’d in grim repose, expects his evening prey.”

CHAPTER I

GILDED WIRES



HAT fine feathers make fine birds is so self-evident an adage as to admit of no dispute by the most argumentative of cavillers; but that fine feathers make happy birds is a different story altogether, and one which will bear a considerable amount of discussion *pro* and *con*.

Up two pair of stairs in yonder large London house, poised over a box of fragrant mignonette, and commanding the comparatively extensive view of the square gardens, hangs a shining gilt bird-cage, with bath and sanded floor complete, perches for exercise, trays for hempseed and other delicacies, a graceful festooning of groundsel, and a lump of white sugar between the bars. Prison, forsooth! it's a palace; and would its inmate, that bright yellow canary-bird, sing so loudly, think

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you, if she wasn't happy? Don't we know that the bravest voice and the noisiest laugh are unerring indicators of heart's-ease and content? At least the world is well satisfied to take them as such; and surely plenty of birdseed, and sand, and groundsel, and white sugar, are an equivalent for that imaginary blessing which men term liberty. 'Tis a sad heart that sighs for the wings of a dove; the canary don't want any wings, she has no use even for her own glossy yellow pair; and for liberty, why she wouldn't know what to do with it if she had it. 'Tis only on a day like this, when the May sunshine bursts forth into somewhat of summer warmth, when the tender green leaves, as yet unsmirched by London smoke, quiver in the breath of spring, and the fleecy clouds dance against the blue sky even over Belgrave Square, that the cage looks a little narrow and confined, that the vagrant life of yonder dirty sparrow appears somewhat enviable. It must be joyful to be free to perch on the area railings, or to sip from the muddy kennel, and twitter away at will over chimney and housetop, into the fragrant hedgerows and sunny fields of the pleasant country. But then he is but a common sparrow, after all, and she is a delicate canary—*noblesse oblige*, indeed, in many more ways than one.

What thinks her high-born mistress, the Lady Gertrude, an earl's sister and a sovereign's god-child? With the wholesome fear of Burke and Debrett before my eyes, I suppress the proper name of the noble maiden. Shall I involve myself in an action for libel at the suit of a distinguished family? Shall I pander to the morbid taste of that numerous and respectable class who make it their especial study to identify the persons of the aristocracy and chronicle their deeds? *Vade retro*—be it far from me! The titled daughters of England are classed and ticketed in certain catalogues published by authority, with mercantile fidelity. With the same accuracy that is at once his pride and his profession, in measuring her off a thousand yards of *tulle* for the trimming of her ball-dress, can John Ellworthy, the mercer, calculate to a day the age of Lady Hildegonda Vavasour. Her ladyship is debarred by the remnants of feudalism from the very birth-right of lowlier women, never to exceed seven-and-twenty. Like those high-bred Arab steeds which the children of the desert offer for purchase to the Feringhee, there can be no concealment of her age or her performances; and she is sold, so to speak, with her pedigree about her neck. Be gentle with her in her new capacity; like all thoroughbred animals she is staunch and resolute for good and for evil.

GILDED WIRES

Lady Gertrude is alone in the privacy of her own chamber. Bedroom, dressing-room, boudoir, sanctuary, it combines something of all of these. Her midnight slumbers and her morning dreams take place in a deep and distant recess, containing a charming little French bed, like a toy, draped with a rosy fabric of muslin, corresponding in colour and texture with the toilet-cover and the pincushion. Her Prayer-book of purple velvet, crossed and clasped, and bound and bedizened with gold, lies within easy reach of the lace-edged pillows, and where male imbecility would look instinctively for a boot-jack, a pair of sweet little slippers, fawn-coloured, with bronze tips and beaded embroidery, turn their toes to each other in confiding simplicity. A pianoforte occupies the corresponding recess at the other side of the doorway. A piece of music lies open on its stand; it is an oratorio of Handel's—a deep, solemn, and suggestive strain, such as to sit and hear with half-shut eyes, from which the tears are not far distant, calls up a vision of the shadowy Future and the mournful Past, of the bruised reed and the aching heart, of hopes and fears, and bitter sorrow, and humble resignation, and the white-robed angels leading the poor penitent home.

She is not all frivolous, you see, my Lady Gertrude, though the canterbury by the side of the instrument contains the Rat-catcher waltz, and the "Pray don't" polka, and other refined and popular music of the modern school.

Her bookshelves, too, bear a strange mixture of literature, light and heavy, ancient and modern. No Byron, no Tommy Moore. A quarto Milton, we dare not say *thumbed*, but worn and frayed by the taper-white fingers, and holding even now between the pages of Satan's rebellious peroration a single thread of hair, denoting that while Justine dresses the silken locks, Lady Gertrude is no less busy than her handmaid with the inner culture of that haughty little head. A voluminous Shakespeare with notes, a translation of Herodotus, Swedenborg's Transcendental Lucubrations; Euclid, which she *cannot* understand, but perseveres at from sheer obstinacy, even to the hopeless and utterly futile task of learning him by heart; Schiller in the original, whom she don't much care about; Tennyson's *Maud*, that she would never confess she cries over like a child; sundry excellent works of reference on chemistry, optics, geology, and other sciences; two or three odd volumes of sermons, new and stiff in the binding, as if but rarely consulted; and a French novel, doubtless contra-band, and having no business there. By the way, what is the intrinsic merit of this species of literature? Why is it gradu^z

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ally becoming so popular in England? Is it that the less scrupulous Frenchman hesitates not to paint phases of life which British conventionality affects to ignore, the while they move the mainsprings of everyday society? or is it that he has a happy knack of describing gracefully the mere trifles we all know so well, and imparting an additional charm to the interest every reader feels in matters with which he is himself familiar, as we see a farce run night after night, wherein a man eats a real mutton-chop on the stage, or goes to bed bodily then and there in full sight of the audience? Whatever may be the attraction, there is no doubt that these works are day by day more generally read, notwithstanding their questionable taste, their doubtful morality, and unblushing disquisitions on sentiments which at least we don't *write* about on this side the channel. Perhaps there may be something in the language after all, and we may opine with Billy Fudge that—

“Though the words on good manners intrench,
I assure you 'tis not half so shocking in French.”

One or two exquisite casts of children are placed, too, here and there on brackets in the corners of the room; and a sufficiently faithful copy of Franceschini's "Sleeping St. John" overhangs the chimneypiece. Lady G. is not above the mania for little naked boys, so prevalent during the present era that they may be purchased in any of the bazaars at a shilling a dozen, and indeed the holy infant in his slumbers is a gem that I have seen but rarely equalled in real life. So she prizes it accordingly, and suffers no other painting to lodge permanently in her chamber save one, and that is a mere coloured photograph, set in a costly framework of velvet and gold, placed in a favourable light on her own especial writing-table (littered as a lady's writing-table invariably is with every sort of knick-knack and destitute of that freedom and elbow-room so indispensable to the efforts of masculine penmanship); this additional ornament is but a pleasing representation of a well-looking and well-dressed young gentleman, very like the other ninety and nine out of any hundred of well-dressed young gentlemen who pass their time in going to and fro in St. James' Street as Satan does upon earth, and walking up and down in it. He is good to look at, too, with his dark, silken hair, his soft eyes with their long lashes, and rich brown whiskers curling round a pair of smiling lips, and a little dimple chin such as ought to have belonged to a woman; this countenance surmounting nevertheless a large, well-developed frame

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indubitably characteristic of a man's organisation, and a man's physical courage and vigour.

Lady Gertrude wipes the miniature half tenderly, half triumphantly, with her delicate handkerchief; then she smiles, such a saucy mischievous smile as dimples a child's face when it has ousted a playmate at puss-in-the-corner. Lastly, she walks up to the full-length mirror, which has reflected her graceful person so often, and in so many becoming costumes — ball-dress, court-dress, riding-habit, and *peignoir* — the woman's true friend and constant counsellor; the adroit flatterer in sunshine, the sympathising consoler in storms, the depository of how many a secret triumph and buoyant aspiration, and how many a galling disappointment and weary, hopeless sigh. Carefully, and inch by inch as it were, she scans what she sees there; but the expression in her ladyship's face is scarcely that of self-satisfied female vanity. There is a look of mingled confidence and inquiry, more akin to Lord Martingale's calculating glance as he eyes the favourite for the Derby, bred by himself, and trained in his own stable, stripped and mounted for the race; or Herr Merlin's sweeping review of his magic rings, his all-productive hat, and the other accessories with which he effects his incredible feats of legerdemain.

The reflection is that of a striking girl enough. A tall, graceful form, too slight, it may be, to fulfil the rigorous standard of womanly beauty, but rounded and symmetrical as a nymph's, with the same length of limb and airiness of gesture which painters have combined to confer on those mythological coquettes. The hands and feet are perfect, long, slender, and flexible, they assimilate well with the undulating lines of her patrician figure, and the stately *pose* of her proud head. Dark masses of hair, that look black against the pure white skin, are gathered into a twisted knot behind the skull, pulled away somewhat too boldly from the temples, and disclosing the faultless outline of the cheek and the perfect little thoroughbred ear. Nor is Lady Gertrude's face out of character with the rest of her person. The forehead, though low, has width and capacity; bright hazel eyes sparkle with vivacity and a considerable touch of satirical humour, while the defect of too wide a mouth is redeemed by the whitest of teeth, and, when occasion offers, the merriest of smiles. Though a critic might pronounce her features too sharp and birdlike, though in her light primrose morning dress she has a certain resemblance to her own canary, the general effect of her face denotes considerable intellect, no

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slight leaven of caprice, above all, great persistence and force of will.

The young lady turns at length from the perusal of her own features, and moves towards the window, where hang the cage and the canary. The bird knows her mistress, and chirps and flutters in her prison, and beats her breast against the bars. The sunshine pours in floods into the room, and a fragrant breeze from Surrey scatters a hundred blossoms from the square gardens over a dingy coal dray and the boy with the beer, and an astonished figure—a footman—emerging in his magnificence from the area with a note. How sweet the mignonette smells, and how that silly bird is fighting with the cage! For the second time within the last five minutes her mistress experiences a morbid desire to unhook the door and let the captive go free. "But then," she reflects, "poor thing, you are not used to liberty, and you would die. A prisoner you were bred, and a prisoner you must remain."

A cloud comes over Lady Gertrude's face as she turns with a listless air from the open window and the mellow sunshine, and sits her down in her own arm-chair to think.

Now, in order to follow the thread of Lady Gertrude's ruminations, it is indispensable to put the clock back to the hour of noon; as it is already nearly luncheon time, a meal which everybody knows would interfere with the servants' dinner if it took place before two p.m. At noon, then, Lady Gertrude emerged from the door of No. 00 Belgrave Square, in the primrose-coloured dress already hinted at, and such a bonnet as Paris only can produce, to cross the well-watered road with decorous speed, and let herself into the gardens with her own pass-key; it being freely admitted by the logical verdict of English society, that in these chaste groves Dian herself might perambulate without a chaperone. The canary, had she been on the watch, might then have observed her mistress pacing the gravel-walk to and fro with something of quarter-deck impatience and energy. In truth, there is nothing provokes a woman so much as to be kept waiting, and this is the more unjustifiable when we consider that it is a penance she takes much pleasure in exacting from the opposite sex.

The sixth turn, however, and such a clench of the slender hand and stamp of the slender foot as constitute what our American friends term a "caution," brought her once more to the entrance-gate, where a good-looking face, framed in a pair of brown whiskers, and surmounted by a white hat, being indeed no other than the original of the photograph upstairs,

GILDED WIRES

was seen imploring admittance, with a comical expression of half penitence, half amusement, depicted on its comely lineaments. Lady Gertrude's wrath seemed to evaporate as she turned the key for ingress of the new arrival; but it was with a backward toss of the head, and in a sharper tone of voice than ordinary, that she met him with a reproach rather than a greeting.

"How very unpunctual you are, Gilbert. I told you half-past eleven on purpose that you mightn't keep me waiting."

"So you would have given me the forty minutes of anxiety and agitation instead," replied the gentleman, with a pleasant laugh; "and you know that every minute I wait for you seems an age. Oh, Gertrude! what a bully you are!"

She was the least bit of a tyrant, if the truth must be told, and to-day she was in one of her most imperious moods, so she threw her head up once more as she resumed.

"I tell you honestly, I'm going to quarrel with you, Gilbert. It has been brewing for a week, and I mean really to have it out at last. There! of course you begin to smoke, though you know I hate it; but I suppose it's no use my forbidding you to do anything. I wonder which of them worked you that tawdry cigar-case. Bought it at the Baker Street Bazaar? oh, I daresay! Well, what have you got to say in your defence? Come, now, begin."

The owner of the white hat put a pair of lavender-kidded hands together in an attitude of supplication, and without removing his cigar from his lips, mumbled out the very apposite question—

"What have I done?"

"It's not what you've done," she replied, "and I can't help laughing at you, though I am so provoked. Pray don't be so absurd, with all those nurses and children looking at us! It's not what you have done, but what you have left undone. Pray, since when have gentlemen considered it honourable to break their word to a lady because she's a cousin? Where were you last Thursday when you ought to have met us at Sydenham? and even Aunt Olivia said it was just like you to forget all about it!"

"I am always sure of my mother's good word," replied the gentleman, somewhat bitterly; "but last Thursday was the day of the pigeon match."

"Pigeon match!" echoed his cousin, with the colour mounting rapidly; "*that* won't do. Why the 'ties,' as you

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call them, were shot off before two o'clock. I know it, because I asked Charley Wing the same night, at Ormolu House. By the way, he dances as well again as he did last year; besides, the pigeon match didn't prevent people going to see those hideous rhododendrons, and as Mrs. Montpellier's yellow barouche was there from three till five, I suppose she gave you a lift back into London."

"You wouldn't have wished me to walk," said the unabashed culprit, holding up at the same time a thin and remarkably neat boot, on which it is needless to say he prided himself not a little.

"What I wish seems to be a matter of the greatest indifference," was the reply. "But, indeed, Gilbert, there is nobody to scold you but me; at least, you say yourself you never pay attention to anyone else, and you know, after all, I'm a very near relation, and—and—like a sister, in short, and I own I *was* hurt that you never came near us all last week, and you didn't go to Lady Broadway's, though I sent your invitation myself. Such a stupid ball, Gilbert; and Aunt Olivia, though she says nothing, I can see she don't like it. It's not so much for my own sake I mind it, as for hers; and then, you are doing yourself incalculable harm. Is it true you lost so much money on that childish match of Count Carambole's?"

"A hatful," answered the defendant, at the same time taking his own off, and looking roguishly into the crown with provoking good-humour.

"What a life!" proceeded Lady Gertrude, waxing visibly impatient. "What a waste of time and position and talent; for you have talent, you know, Gilbert, if you choose to exert it; and all for what? To play billiards night after night at Pratt's, and yawn through the day between the bay window at White's and the end of the ride in the Park; you who might do anything."

"Very good of you to say so, dear," drawled her cousin. "I'm not bad at caricatures, I know, and I think, with a fortnight's practice, I could do the pea-and-thimble well enough to earn a livelihood during the racing season—but as for high art, and science, and a career, and that sort of thing, why it's not exactly in my line."

She looked at him for a minute or two in silence. Something almost of contempt curled her lip, while she checked the words that came uppermost, but her eye softened as it rested on his comely, good-humoured face, with its habitual expression of lazy contentment, and she put her arm within

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his and pressed it kindly as she asked his pardon for so lecturing him and taking him to task.

"But you know, Gilbert," she said, "Aunt Olivia never scolds you; and so if I didn't nobody would take any pains with you, and what would become of you then? I don't believe you really care for any one mortal thing in the world, and more than that, Gilbert, I don't believe you are really happy—there!"

She had broke through the crust at last, for this was a home thrust. He had been thinking so himself of late more than once; had been startled to learn that the winecup of youth could taste so flat sometimes, as if filled from a bad bottle; and the garlands, though fresh and rosy still, were not always radiant with the dew of the morning.

"Happy," he repeated musingly; "why should I be happy? After all, I am pretty well alone in the world, Gertrude. I don't believe anyone in London cares two straws about me but you. I have no home; certainly not *there*," he added, nodding towards the house whereat hung the cage and the canary, and to which it was already time for his cousin to return. "But I live as ninety-nine out of every hundred do. I take the rough with the smooth; and I suppose, after all, I am as well off as my neighbours. At least, I don't know any I should like to change places with. Certainly none that own such a pretty cousin with such a pretty bonnet. Time to go in, is it? Well, good-bye, Gertrude dear; I'm always the better for a scolding from you, and I'll do anything you like this afternoon, only let me out of the square first. If I don't go away, you know, I can't come back again."

So the white hat was presently vacillating up the shady side of Grosvenor Place, and Lady Gertrude having taken off her bonnet, which it now struck her was indeed a very pretty one, sate her down, as we have already stated, in her own arm-chair, to recapitulate and think over the events of the morning.

The result of her cogitations was, in one respect at least, decisive. She went to her writing-table, and selecting a pen with great care, proceeded to write a note, which she folded and sealed with accurate nicety. We must do women the justice to allow that their missives, however involved in sense and grammar, are at least fairly and decently worked out as regards caligraphy; and that they do not seem to consider the legacy of Cadmus simply as a means of puzzling their hapless correspondents.

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This done, she looked once more at the coloured photograph, once more at the winsome Lady Gertrude over yonder in the looking-glass; then she walked restlessly to the window, and looked forth into the square gardens she had so recently quitted, and drew a long breath as of one who has at last solved a difficulty, the while she murmured in an audible whisper—

“It will be far better for us both; I shall marry my cousin Gilbert!”

And the canary struggled to get out of her cage, and fought, and fluttered, and beat her breast against the bars.

CHAPTER II

I REMEMBER

THE cads at Tattersall's Yard knew Gilbert Orme as well as the Wellington statue. The fast young gentlemen who frequent that equine resort, had each and all a greeting and a pleasant word or two for avowedly "about the nicest fellow in England." Half a dozen seasons in London, autumns at Cowes, and winters in the grass countries, had thoroughly identified him with that abnormal portion of the human race which calls itself the world; and with good health, good spirits, good looks, and a good income, few went the pace so easily and gracefully as gentle Gilbert Orme. A long minority had put him in possession of a large sum of ready money, so that the gloss of youth was untarnished by the many annoyances and anxieties which lie upon none so heavily as those who cannot afford to live *in* society, and cannot bear to live *out* of it. "How I should hate to be a poor man!" was Gilbert's oft-quoted exclamation, when he overheard young Brozier lamenting his inability to keep a certain high-stepping cab-horse, which was the only claim to distinction advanced by that uninteresting youth, and the sentiment counted for a joke at the clubs. Many of the members knew its import too well by bitter experience, for, alas, several of those magnificoes whom we are so often called upon to admire as they pace the Ride in equestrian splendour, or traverse Pall Mall in gorgeous apparel, have secret debts and difficulties far more enthralling than those of Mr. Plausible, the coach-maker, whose schedule bears him triumphantly through the Insolvent Court; and ends that won't stretch to come within half a yard as near meeting as those of John Stokes, the bricklayer. Varnished boots are beautiful objects to look at, but a thick sole with ease is more comfortable for walking, and no man knows where the shoe pinches so well as he who wears it.

I often think that the life of a young man about London has in nine cases out of ten something of the excitement and

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adventure of a brigand's or a buccaneer's. The moral piracy that would fain board every prize and haul down every flag; the unceasing endeavour to sail nearer the wind than the adversary, and take every advantage, fair and unfair, of the chase; the cutting-out expeditions, the unacknowledged repulses, the boasted triumphs, the strange freemasonry that exists between reckless men; above all, the uncertainty of the career, and the consciousness that it must end in a general smash at last. All this invests a fast man's life with some inexplicable fascination, to which we must attribute the numerical strength of the class. How many there are who trust to the turn of a trump-card or the spin of a billiard-ball for the very means by which they keep their heads above water day by day; and whose future, morally and physically, is bounded by the settling after Goodwood. Pleasant, sunshiny, and agreeable, they are totally devoid of scruples, and utterly reckless of consequences—such characters, in short, as are summed up in the modern satirist's description of a promising young man:—

“The damsel's delight, and the chaperone's fear,
He is voted a trump amongst men;
His father allows him two hundred a year,
And he'll lay you a thousand to ten!”

But Gilbert Orme was not one of these. Living as he did in the midst of the temptations and dissipations of a London life, there was a certain childlike simplicity in his character which, while it enhanced the pungency of his pleasures, doubtless deprived them of their most deleterious ingredients. Far be it from me to affirm that “to the pure all things are pure,” or indeed that Gilbert's theory and practice were much less lax than his neighbours'; but frail mortality at least is inclined to look leniently on those errors in which the imagination and the intellect predominate over the senses; and he must have been a stern Mentor, and forgotten the while that he had ever himself been a boy, who could have clipped the wings of that high-hearted young eagle, soaring indeed far beyond the bounds of conventionality and decorum, but yet soaring ever upwards nearer and nearer to the sun.

I can see him now, as he was long after he had wound himself round my old heart, a lad of eighteen. I can see his tall graceful figure as he used to jump the ha-ha that divided the lawn from the park at West Acres, and bound away over the turf lithe and active, as the very deer scouring before him. I can see him carry out his bat, with a score of fifty-six

I REMEMBER

notches that I marked for him with my own fingers the day the West Acres eleven beat the united strength of Batthorpe and Bowlsover in one innings. He walked to the tent like a young hero, with his head up and his eye sparkling, followed by a round of applause ungrudgingly bestowed by the players on both sides, and many an admiring glance from the benches on which various coloured dresses and gossamer bonnets quivered and bloomed like a parterre of garden flowers in July. The boy used to come and tell me his triumphs and his misgivings, and pour out his rich fancies, and open his glad young heart with an abandonment and a fresh sincerity that endeared him to me strangely, for I was an old man even then, and the heavy sorrow that had crushed me in manhood, but had been borne, I trust, humbly and resignedly in age, had taught me to feel kindly for all, and especially to sympathise with the young.

If they knew, if they only knew! what that Future really is to which they look so longingly. Woe is me! not one of them but would cast his burden to the ground, and sit down by the wayside, and refuse to move one single step farther on the journey.

I was reading with him before he went to Oxford; not coaching and cramming him with dry facts and technical memories, but sauntering pleasantly through the beauties of those glorious old Greek minds, as a man might walk slowly arm-in-arm with a friend in a gallery of art. My boy (I can bear to call him my boy now) was a scholar, not literally in the dull everyday acceptation of the word, but essentially, and, so to speak, in its æsthetic sense. He might not dig the Greek root, or criticise the verb's middle voice quite so assiduously as some more plodding students, but his conception of Homer's heroes, I am convinced, would have satisfied the blind old wizard himself. His spirit seemed steeped in those rolling hexameters, like the garland of Alcibiades dripping and saturated with strong rich Chian wine. I am sure that he could see the son of Peleus standing visibly before him in the blaze of his young beauty, and the pride of his heroic strength; could mark the thin Greek nostril dilating in its wrath, and the godlike head thrown back in high disdain, with scorn on the chiseled lip, and hate in the flashing eye, and stern defiance stamped on the fair wide brow. I know that Briseis was not to him the mere *ancilla* who constituted lot No. 1 of a freebooter's plunder, but an ivory-limbed shape, smooth and faultless, cowering in her loveliness under a shower of golden tresses, through which the white shoulder

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peeped and peered coyly ; the while the red lip curled half in smiles, half in entreaties, and the lustrous eyes looked upward from under their long veiling lashes, deepening and softening with mingled love and fear. My boy would read out the burning lines in a low earnest tone, like a man reciting his own poetry ; and I knew when I saw his colour rise, and heard his full young voice shake, that he was back upon the sands before Troy, with white-crested Olympus towering on the horizon before him, and the blue sea wreathing into ever-changing smiles at his feet.

Ah, me ! it seems like a dream now, to have ever sat in the hot summer noons under the old oaks at West Acres. The old oaks that stood apart one by one in their majestic beauty, dotting the level English-looking park where the deer browsed lazily in the shade, and the white swans glistened on the burnished surface of the lake : to hear the distant voices of the haymakers blending with the hum of insects in the sun-dried air, and the wood-pigeon cooing softly in the leafy depths of the dense elm-grove, and the chimes striking faintly from the square tower of the far-away village church. It was a dear old place, with its red brick wings and white portico, and all the architectural incongruities of Inigo Jones' taste. There is a degree of comfort in one of these real English houses that we look for in vain elsewhere. But the favourite spot in which Gilbert and I chose to pursue our studies, was half a mile off in the park, under an old-oak tree, where the fern grew three feet high, and a clear spring bubbled and sparkled through the green sward ankle deep in moss.

It was a strange and suggestive contrast, yet was it not altogether out of keeping to bask in that fragrant spot, and read the noble thoughts, and the shrewd, yet simple reflections ; above all, the deep heartfelt poetry of those grand old heathens ; to mark the worldly wisdom of the cynic, cold, heartless, and essentially logical, in the colonnades and porticoes of Athens, more than two thousand years ago, as on the steps of White's at the present day ; to watch the ideal tendency, the *divinæ particula auræ*, always choked down and smothered, never totally extinguished, in all the casuistry and the luxury, and the gross habitual sin of Greece and Rome, just as it sparkles out and flashes upward now in London or Paris, reaching and leaping and striving towards the heaven from which it came. Is the fable of Prometheus but a legend of barbarians ? Is it not rather the profoundest of parables, the most graceful of allegories and myths ? Whoever of ancient or modern times has singled himself out from



Under an old oak tree

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the common herd to benefit or instruct his kind, him have the common herd scouted and stigmatised as an impostor or a fool. They voted Paul mad, and they doomed Socrates to die. Was not that a deep and sad insight into human nature, which feigned that he who brought down fire from heaven, was chained upon the cold rock and tortured the while by a vulture tearing at his heart? Alas for the gifted and the good! they lay their hearts bare in their frank trust and their honesty of purpose, their kindly hearts that throb and quiver to an injury; they lay them bare, and they chain themselves to the naked rock, and beak and talons rend them to the core.

But Gilbert, like all boys, saw in the ancients his ideal of manhood, moral as well as physical, and respected them accordingly. How many and many a time under the old oak-tree would he argue with me on their chivalry, their patriotism, and their love of all that was noble and good. How his eye kindled when he quoted Curtius driving his war-steed headlong into the gulf, or Leonidas willing to sup with Pluto, so that he turned the Persian myriads back from the human bulwark framed by his own and the bodies of the devoted handful that held the pass of Thermopylæ; or the high-crested Horatius and his trusty twain to right and left, the pride of Rome, herself a colony of warriors—

“ The three who kept the bridge so well,
In the brave days of old ;”

or any of the thousand instances of patriotic devotion and heroic daring with which the annals of those large-hearted heathens teem.

Many a time we laid the book upon the grass, and, regardless of cricket, fishing, boating, the warning-bell for luncheon, or the carriage-load of visitors grinding up the avenue, we commented hour after hour on the subject of our studies, and discussed, each in our own way, the comparative advantages of ancient and modern times. My boy, of course, was all for shield and helmet against hat and umbrella; preferred his ideal Rome, with its Appian Way and its Forum, to the material London, of which he knew too well the Piccadilly and the cab-stands; opined that we had hardly yet recovered the effects of the dark ages; esteemed the Olympic Games far superior to the Derby, and regretted equally the laurelled triumphs glistening and winding upward to the Capitol, with the free discussions when sage met sage in the open Athenian schools; with the glorious obstinacy of youth, adopted the irrational side of the argument, and stood by it to the death.

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But it was on the oft-vexed question of woman's mission and woman's influence that my young pupil came out in his brightest colours. I have heard military men affirm that perfectly raw recruits, who have never seen a shot fired, are preferable to the staunchest veterans for one desperate *coup de main* or rash haphazard attack; and in the same way, I have often remarked that the boy of eighteen professes an utter contempt for his natural enemy, where the man of thirty guards every assailable point, and intrenches himself in the strongest position he can command. Ten years later he will decamp without beat of drum, and seek safety in flight. On one occasion, I hazarded the opinion that the woman worship which came in with the institution of chivalry, and will not outlast that superstition a day, had done more than any human influence to advance our civilisation and ameliorate the condition of mankind. Gilbert was in arms at once, he disputed my position at its very outset, he denied that woman ever had any influence at all, except among the weaker minds and less commanding spirits of the opposite sex. He flushed and chafed with the subject as he threw his straw hat aside and walked up and down in the sun, like a young Apollo. I ought to have been gratified with his progress. He brought all the learning he possessed to bear upon the subject, and fired off a sixty-eight pounder, so to speak, at the commencement of the action.

“Why, even old Herodotus sneers at them as mere chattels,” quoth the untried legionary; “and like a dry old fellow as he is, he gives us his real opinion when he quotes the sensible maxim of the Persians, ‘that to carry off women by violence is the act of wicked men, but to trouble oneself about avenging them when so carried off, is the act of foolish ones, and to pay no regard to them when carried off, the act of wise men; for that it is clear that if they had not been willing, they could not have been carried off.’ We were reading it only last week, and you laughed yourself, though you don't often laugh, when I construed the passage. It is clear that he didn't think them much worth troubling oneself about. Nor have I forgotten the inscriptions of Sesostris, nor the regulations of the Egyptians, which permitted no woman to enter the precincts of a temple, as an inferior being unworthy of the service of a god or goddess; and even the Greeks, though they were fools enough to make war about Helen, treated their captive women as slaves, and only respected their mothers and sisters as a part of themselves, not because they belonged to the inferior sex; whilst the Romans, who, I

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have heard you say, improved as much upon the Greeks in common sense as they fell short of them in imagination and poetry, evidently considered them mere machines to rear their children, and if ever they did speak of them as gracing the winecup, or enhancing the charms of a feast, apparently deemed it a matter of no moment which should be the preferred one, but lumped in Chloris and Chloë, Lydia and Lalage, all at the same premium, one as good as another."

"Yet did the conquerors of these very Romans, the tall Gothic barbarians, frame all their measures by the advice of their wives, nay, even bade the experience of the warrior give place in council to the *sagas* of the wise women, daughters of Odin."

I hazarded this argument with some diffidence, knowing the storm it would bring down.

"The bull-headed, superstitious, beef-devouring gladiators!" was the reply, "with just enough sense to knock their heads against a wall, which luckily for them had been sapped and crumbling for centuries. Could they keep Rome when they had it? Could they defend Constantinople when it was in their clumsy iron grasp? Did not the Turks press them hard on the Bosphorus? Did not the Moors enslave them in Spain? The polygamist against the monogamist all the world over, till the latter abandoned his creed and began to put his faith in policy and common-sense, instead of a cross-handled sword and a long-eyed ladye light-o'-love!"

"Then you scorn the institution of chivalry, Gilbert," was my reply; "and prefer the picture of Archimedes demonstrating his problem during the assault, to that of Dunois bleeding to death with his back to a tree and his face to the enemy, the while he made a Christian ending before the crucifix of his sword-hilt?"

"Dunois was a fine fellow!" answered Gilbert; "besides, there was no woman in *his* case. What I protest against is the raising up an idol and bowing down before it because it has soft eyes and long hair. You always take the other side of the question to draw me out; I know I'm right, because I *feel* I am. How hot it is! There's my mother going out in the carriage. Don't let us read any more for to-day; come and take up the trimmers we set last night, and after that we'll go and catch a pike in the witch-pool under the elms."

I rose and followed him in silence, thinking of Antony and the tawny-finned fishes, and the hook that sooner or later is in every man's nose.

CHAPTER III

EARLY FROSTS

I WAS not always a recluse—not always the musty book-worm who exists only amongst dusty shelves and rare old badly-printed editions. The same man who some years ago would have bade me see his two-year-olds gallop, now asks me to arrange his library. I once lived in the world as others do. Shall I confess it? my heart was never thoroughly interested in what is termed society. Perhaps I had not room for so many objects of interest and affection; perhaps, like an unskilful gambler, I set all my store on one desperate throw, and lost, and cared not to try again; to play for silver where I had once staked gold. So the bowl has stood empty ever since. This is no story of my own life. I only mention it because I want an explanation of something which my former experience has convinced me to be an undoubted fact; and I do not wish my experience to be set at nought, as that of one who has never been down in the arena, and spilt his blood upon the thirsty sand.

Why is it that in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred those women who have been brought up chiefly amongst men, who have had no sisters, who have lost a mother early in life (doubtless for many reasons a sad affliction to a girl), who have been dependent on father or brothers for society and conversation, should turn out the most fascinating and superior of their sex? Why is it that in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of a thousand, the boy who is educated solely by his mother becomes a triumphant and successful man in after-life?

Perhaps the opposite influence of either sex is beneficial to the other; perhaps the girl derives vigorous thought, expanded views, habits of reflection, nay, more, charity and forbearance, from her male associates, as the boy is indebted to his mother's tuition and his mother's companionship for the gentleness and purity of heart which combine so well with a manly and generous nature, for the refinement and

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delicacy of feeling which so adorn true courage; above all, for that exalted standard of womankind which shall prove his surest safeguard from shame and defeat in the coming battle; a shield impervious so long as it is bright, but that when once soiled slides and crumbles from his grasp, leaving him in the press of angry weapons a naked and defenceless man.

We have all heard of the little boy who sturdily upheld, in defiance of the poet, that "his mamma was the noblest work of God." I think the truest and holiest homage that can be offered to a fellow-creature is that which such a child tenders unconsciously to his mother. She is to him the one bright beautiful being upon earth. His young eyes open wide with childish wonder at the magnificence of her apparel, the mingled grace and majesty of her bearing; he feels so proud to belong to her, and at the same time so conscious of his right to a place by her side, a seat on her knee. When others caress him, he smiles pleasantly enough for a time, but soon wearies, and hurries off to be at play again; but when she lays her quiet hand upon his brow, the boy forgets hoop and marbles, the new knife and the promised pony, to nestle by her side, and look up in her face, and sit lovingly down at the feet of his own mamma. All that he knows of good he learns from her. She teaches him to love and pray. She teaches him to hope and to believe. If ever he gets to the end of the narrow way, where the little wicket stands, and hears the bolts drawn back, and sees the golden light from the happy land shining through, whom shall he thank and bless on earth, but her who first taught him the password and gave him the key? Perhaps she will also be the first to bid him welcome on the other side.

Gilbert Orme was without this unspeakable blessing. Everything else that the world deems advantageous was lavished on him in profusion. Health, vigour, childish spirits, a fine place, and a long minority, but no mother—at least, not in the sense in which I understand the word. Gilbert was an only child, but in good truth he was far from being spoilt, as people consider only children usually destined to be. From boyhood his was a nature on which harshness or ill-usage made but slight impression, a spirit that could only have been broken through its affections, and these, even when I was reading Homer with him at eighteen, had been called but little into play. Lady Olivia never seemed to care for her child. Not a labourer about West Acres but took more pride in the bright-haired handsome boy than did his

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own reserved and haughty mother. When I first knew her she was not yet a widow, but I could never see that the event which soon after deprived her of her husband made the slightest difference in her manners or softened her character one jot.

Of Mr. Orme I knew but little; I had heard of him in former days (for he was somewhat after my time) as a gay dashing young man; on the turf, in society, member for a most corruptible borough in his own county, good-looking, good-humoured, not much troubled with brains, with a slight tendency to literature, and a rather stronger turn for love-making. I saw him once or twice at Newmarket, and missed meeting him at a country place or two, to which we were both invited for the slaughter of pheasants and other game. It interested me but little, and astonished me not at all, to learn that he had married the Lady Olivia, of whose maiden name I will say no more than that it was identical with that of Lady Gertrude, whose father indeed had been the elder lady's brother. But after his marriage Mr. Orme dropped out of society altogether. People in London do not trouble themselves much about absentees.

"Here's Orme accepted the Chiltern Hundreds," said one of his club friends to another as he yawned over the evening paper; "what the deuce is that for? By the way, hasn't something happened to him?"

"Married, poor devil!" was the reply; the speaker himself possessing a charming wife with a numerous family, and very fond of them besides; "but that's no reason he shouldn't come to London. Does anybody know anything about him?"

"Mad!" observed young Tattleton sententiously, who preferred hazarding a falsehood to betraying ignorance on any subject whatever, "and shut up down at that place in the country," he added, shaking his head commiseratingly, and pointing with his forefinger to the spot where his own brains ought to have been.

The two friends were quite satisfied with the explanation, and fell to discussing their last night's dinner, taking no more thought for "poor Orme."

He was not mad, though, nevertheless, only thoroughly and essentially miserable. Lady Olivia might have made an excellent wife to another; probably, like the rest of us, under totally different circumstances, would have been a totally different person. As it was, however, she made a most uncomfortable one to him. He had fallen into a mistake

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not unusual with one of his temperament—weak, kindly, and over-imaginative—and had invested the lady, whom he had met at some half a dozen balls and a breakfast, with all the qualities of his ideal, none of which did she happen to possess. Then came the disenchantment, the disagreements, the re-cremations, the offended pride on one side, the growing dislike and blank hopelessness on the other. It was an ill-judged and most unhappy union. “But,” as Lady Olivia observed, “was that her fault? Was she to be punished because Mr. Orme mistook her for somebody else? No! he had been in error; let him be the sufferer!”

The argument was not without some show of reason, and he suffered accordingly, without much complaint, and with a strong bridle on a temper naturally keen and self-asserting. A sterner nature would have bent her to his will, and altered her character to assimilate it with his own. She would have loved him all the better. A milder would have succumbed, and learned, like other slaves, to submit to despotic authority with a good grace. But Orme was as God had made him, and took refuge in a listless, hopeless, pitiable apathy. He ceased to tear at the chain he had not strength to break, the chain that bound him to one with whom he had not a single feeling in common save abhorrence of the fetter, and threw his hands up like the drowning man, who has the sense to know that his struggles can but prolong his agony.

Those are wise and suggestive words in our Prayer-book which exhort us to take in hand marriage, “discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in fear of God,” words that refer to the highest source, the most important action in the lives of most human beings—words that suggest to the least considerate the awful gravity of the interest at stake. A loving marriage is a good and holy sight in the eyes of men and angels, but that was the refinement of a fiend’s torture which bound the living breathing being hard and fast to the senseless corpse.

I have heard his neighbours say that Mr. Orme grew strangely idle and indifferent and lethargic. He left off field-sports altogether, gave away his famous pointers, sold his hunters, doubled his subscription to the hounds, and otherwise conducted himself in an unaccountable manner. Some people thought he had gout in the stomach, others vowed it was water on the brain. His old butler, who *wouldn’t* leave, though Lady Olivia gave him warning once a fortnight, opined it was neither of these, for a certain tall bottle labelled V. O. P. stood in his master’s dressing-room;

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and that faithful domestic, who, liking brandy less than beer, took very little of it himself, knew that it was never quite empty and never full.

By degrees he chafed less and less under Lady Olivia's provocations, took less and less interest in his boy (he was fond of the urchin, but a child's love will scarcely stand a man in the stead of everything else), and dozed away more and more time in his arm-chair over the embers of his study-fire. One spring morning they both went out together, and the tall bottle, too, had ebbed to the last teaspoonful. So there was a fine funeral, and Lady Olivia became a widow, and Gilbert an orphan with a little black frock on his back, and a long minority before him. Nobody seemed to care much for poor Orme but the old butler, and he gave up his place immediately, and took the public-house in the village.

In most families such an event would have drawn tighter the bonds of affection which should unite mother and son; with the Ormes, however, it was not so. Lady Olivia, when the customary year of a widow's seclusion had passed by, went into society as before. Perhaps a little more frequently than during the latter months of her husband's life. She was a great stickler for conventional forms, and went to London regularly in the season to keep up her acquaintance, just as she gave large, solemn, frigid dinners at West Acres to sustain her influence in the county. She seemed to have no inclination to marry again. People speculated, indeed, on her intentions, as they always will upon matters with which they can have no earthly concern, and coupled her name with a rich London banker, a superannuated Lord of the Bedchamber, and a neighbouring squire still in his minority. Such reports disturbed her ladyship's equanimity but little. Even Diana was talked about with that young rake Endymion, and Lady Olivia carried her indomitable head so high that she could well afford to look down upon the nods and winks and signs of humbler mortals. He would have been a bold man, too, who could have ventured on a tender subject with that severe beauty crushing him to the dust, those grave eyes looking sternly into his own. Old Flippant, a lady-killer of some twenty years' practice, called her the Marble Widow.

"Egad, sir," said that mature Lothario, "she's a *chiller*, a regular black frost; when the wind's in the east I can't go near her without sneezing."

And, indeed, veteran as he was, he stood in considerable awe of the icy dame of whom he spoke so disparagingly. To give her her due, like Queen Elizabeth of blessed memory,

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she was one of those admirable ladies who could "look a lion down."

I wish for her own sake she could have been kinder to the child. When I first came to live near West Acres he was a bright handsome boy of some seven or eight summers, the least bit of a scapegrace, and rather too fond of rat-catching, rabbiting, and such illiterate amusements; but, as the old keeper used to say, "a little gentleman, every inch of him!" He had all a boy's spirit and a boy's pluck, with something feminine in the shyness of his glance and the soft kindness of his disposition, which endeared him wondrously to the domestics and workpeople about the place. One of the numerous grievances for which he was taken sternly to task by Lady Olivia was his predilection for the society of the grooms and coachman, and his natural preference of the stable to her ladyship's own morning-room, which was in truth a dull place of resort for a child; inasmuch as he was not permitted to romp about or make a noise in those sacred precincts. Also—and of this fault I cannot fairly hold him guiltless—for the reckless manner in which he rode and otherwise maltreated a certain long-suffering pony, called Mouse, of which the extraordinary speed and endurance were daily tested to an unjustifiable extent.

By the way, my first introduction to the young gentleman was brought about through the instrumentality of this much-aggrieved quadruped. I was walking with Lady Olivia in the park a day or two after my arrival in the neighbourhood, discussing with her a matter of business, in which she showed her usual clear-headedness and precision, when my attention was arrested by the child and his pony scouring over the park in our vicinity—I need not say at poor Mouse's utmost speed. Lady Olivia stopped in her walk and drew herself up as was her wont. "I wish you to know my son," she said in her cold measured voice; and the clear imperious tones calling, "Gilbert! Gilbert!" cut through the summer air to where he was galloping, intent only on Mouse and his performances.

The child seemed pleased to be taken notice of, and turned quickly in our direction. As he approached us without checking speed, a fallen tree of no great girth lay in his course, and with a pardonable display of horsemanship he put his pony straight at the obstacle. I can see him now, sitting resolutely back on his little saddle, his golden curls floating behind him, and his smooth brow bent, and rosy lips set fast for the effort. Mouse rose gallantly, but predestined to failure,

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or perhaps a little blown with the pace, caught his fore-legs in the leap, and pitching his little rider forward over his head, followed him in a very complicated and dangerous kind of fall. I was standing close to his mother, and I thought I heard her breath come quick; but as the child rose to his feet, I glanced at her face ere I went to catch the pony, and saw that it retained its usual marble composure. "What is the woman made of?" I thought, as I ran my arm through Mouse's rein, who no sooner found himself on his legs again without a rider, than he took advantage of the respite to crop a mouthful of the short sweet grass.

When I came back to them the child had his hand in his mother's. He was pale, and evidently shaken, but not frightened the least bit, though there was a severe bruise reddening and smartening on his cheek-bone. With some vague remembrance of his nursery days, he looked up in Lady Olivia's face, and I heard him whisper—

"It *does* hurt, mamma dear; kiss it and make it well!"

"Nonsense, Gilbert," was the cold reply, "don't be so silly; how can my kissing it do it any good?"

I saw his little face flush up and change all in a minute; I think I remembered even then of Him who said it was not good to offend one of these little ones; but I helped the child into his saddle in silence, and was not surprised to see poor Mouse taken short by the head, and turned round to jump once, twice, over the unlucky tree, with so fierce an application of his rider's whip as I have seldom witnessed before or since.

"Gently, child," I could not forbear saying, as I took hold of the pony's bridle and caressed it after the second performance; "do not punish your poor pony; it was more your fault than his. Another time do not ride so fast at an upright leap."

The boy stared at me without replying, then turned and galloped away; whilst Lady Olivia and I continued our walk and our conversation without again reverting to the accident. But when the luncheon-bell rang, and her ladyship had gone into the house, I met Gilbert on his way from the stables. He came up to me very shyly, and put his little hand timidly in mine.

"I like you," he said, "because you were sorry for poor Mouse when I beat him." Then looking down and getting very red, he added, "I like people who are sorry; I would like you very much if you would let me."

Need I say that henceforth we were fast friends? I will not recapitulate the progress of our intimacy. How family

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circumstances brought me more and more into contact with Lady Olivia and her son. How I used to correspond with the lad at Eton, and visit him regularly in the dear old College, from the "after-twelve" on which with three others of the fourth form he was most deservedly "swished," having attempted in vain to get off with a seventh first-fault, till the memorable evening of that 4th of June on which I went up "sitter" with him to Surley Hall, and he pulled stroke in the ten-oar. How we parted with mutual regret when he went abroad for six months, and met again delighted, to read, as I have already said, for his matriculation at Oxford; a place from which I regret to say my pupil was more than once rusticated, in consequence of his attachment to divers sports and pursuits which cannot be brought to harmonise with academical regulations. But still, Orme was avowedly the most popular man in his College. I knew one or two of the dons behind the scenes; their faces always brightened when his name was mentioned; and they were quite of my opinion, that with the least thing more application he could have taken honours. As it was, I am constrained to admit that my pupil was plucked, and being by that time pretty well his own master, he abandoned the University in disgust.

Nevertheless, I do not believe that the ripest scholar of them all could have written a letter teeming with such classical learning, fun, and imagination, as that in which he apprised me of the unexpected failure; nor would I have exchanged for the proudest diploma of science the kindly expressions of regard and sympathy in which he couched his announcement of a defeat which he regretted far more for my sake than his own. After this I saw him of course at rarer intervals; the lives of a young man in the world and an old man out of the world are so different, that they need seldom expect to meet. For full two years I had not set eyes on him, when I met him in Piccadilly on that spring day to which I have already alluded, after his walk with his cousin, Lady Gertrude, in the square. We were on opposite sides of the street, but my boy rushed across, regardless of mud and omnibuses, with all his old freshness and cordiality, to link me by the arm and turn me as of yore in his own direction instead of mine.

"You have nothing in the world to do," said the butterfly to the earthworm, "and I am always so busy I have not a moment to spare. Come with me as far as the top of St. James's Street, and tell me all about yourself as we go along."

I had been busier perhaps than he thought for, but my

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day's work was nearly over ere his had begun, and it was refreshing to look upon his kindly handsome face, and listen to the tones of his cheerful hearty voice once more, though it seemed to me that they were a little faded and saddened to what they had been long ago. I sometimes think the world wears the gloss off the players faster than the workers. It may be perhaps that the former are the more in earnest of the two. I know that I would fain possess the same energies now to be expended on useful purposes, which I wasted in my youth on trifles and worse than trifles; but, alas! in life, *vestigia nulla retrorsum*, and indeed that world of long ago was a bright and a joyous world after all.

It had not palled entirely on Gilbert yet. As we paced slowly along the pavement, every second man we met seemed to know Orme and to be glad to see him. Bright glances were shot at him from open carriages, and pretty fingers kissed in his favour from brougham windows. Truth is truth, and despite all the sneers of philosophers, it is no unpleasant lot, while it lasts, to be young, rich, well-looking, and well received in London society. A man must either be very happy or very miserable, who can afford to treat the opinion of his fellows with contempt. Even my own old heart felt lighter after my walk with my pupil; and I wended my way towards the British Museum, where I resolved to spend the afternoon, with a firmer step than usual; the while Gilbert, with his hat very much on one side, sprang lightly up the steps at White's and inquired according to custom of the affable functionary who presides over the postal department, whether there were "any letters for Mr. Orme?"

There was one, a note that had just arrived. Gilbert smiled as he perused the laconic contents—

"DEAR GILBERT,—The tickets have come for the morning concert. We will call for you at White's in an hour.—Yours as ever,
G."

"That's rather a bore," remarked the recipient with a yawn; "however, I promised Gertrude, and, after all, it's SOMETHING TO DO!"

CHAPTER IV

THE BEES AND THE DRONES

HOW little does one half the world know how the other half lives. The streams of life, like the waters of the Rhine and the Moselle, though they flow down the same channel, fatten the same pastures, turn the same mill, and eddy over the same shoals, meet, but mingle not; and what interests are there in common between No. 1 and No. 2 of any street, square, or row in the great city? Your next-door neighbour, the man who spends his whole life separated from you by a party wall of one brick and a half in thickness, may be a coiner, an Italian refugee, or an alchemist in search of the philosopher's stone, for aught you know to the contrary. You lay your head on your pillow within eighteen inches of his, and whilst the rosy dreams from which it is such a mockery to awake, are gilding your morning sleep, he may be lying racked with bodily pain, or breaking his heart with mental torture. What care you? So as he does not poke his fire too loudly, you are unconscious of his existence. For forty years you pay the same water-rate, and consume an equal number of cubic feet of gas, but you never exchange a syllable, probably never set eyes on each other from year's end to year's end, till at last the mutes are standing at the door, the mourning coaches are drawn up decently next the pavement, and one of you removes to another and a narrower house "over the way."

I suppose, with the variety of a little more bloodshed and a little more flirtation, things went on in Babylon the Great much as they do in the London of to-day. The winecup bubbled again and again, *usque ad nauseam* for the high, and the low gasped in vain for a mouthful of pure cold water. The Assyrian in purple wallowed in profusion till he longed for a sensation, even though it were a sting of pain; while the Assyrian in rags starved and drooped at his gates, faint and hungry, and weary of his life. It was the bees whose sweltering labour constructed those hanging gardens, the fame

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of which reached the uttermost ends of the known earth, but it was the drones who walked delicately along their terraces, and languished in their perfumed bowers, and caught the diamond drops from their plashing fountains, gushing, and glittering, and hurling themselves upwards against the scorching sky.

So the bees and the drones jostle each other to-day in the crowded thoroughfares of London, and some take the rough, and some the smooth, and they have nothing in common, and know each other not.

A section of the bees are clustering very busily in a musical portion of the hive. There is a morning concert this afternoon, and the professionals are all in tune and time, preparing for those grand effects and combinations which delight the *dilettante*, and of which less instructed listeners deem it incumbent on them to say, "Magnificent! very fine!" They are assembling even now in a little room off the grand hall, which is already half filled with an impatient audience, reduced to the sad necessity of criticising each other's dresses, and dirtying their gloves with the *programme* as they read it over and over again. The drones are always employed in doing nothing, and always very tired of that laborious occupation. The bees seem to enjoy their half-hour's respite, and to have a good deal of fun and cordiality amongst themselves.

The male portion are chiefly remarkable for the extreme accuracy of their toilettes, and the purity of their close-fitting white kid gloves, which, with black evening coats and continuations, seem somewhat out of place at three o'clock in the day. They are either men of extremely martial appearance, running considerably to mustachio, whisker, and in some cases close-cut beard, or else they affect an open simplicity of countenance amounting to vacuity, enhanced by bare throats and long hair trained studiously off the temples, and flowing down the nape of the neck, than which, in my humble opinion, no fashion is more unbecoming to the face of a male adult.

You would make some strange mistakes, though, if you judged of their tones by their appearance. The large, well-built fellow, with the legs and chest of a Hercules, is the tenor, and if you only heard that soft silvery voice of his quivering and thrilling on the sands by moonlight, you would fancy such seductive notes could proceed from nothing less feminine than a mermaid, instead of a stout, soldierlike convivialist, who would incontinently offer you a cigar, and take you home with him to a Perigord pie and a cool bottle of claret.

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The bass, again, whose diapason shall make the very window-glasses shake before sunset, is a pale, weary-looking man, whom, at first sight, you would call weakly, if not an invalid. His tailor alone knows that he requires a larger girth round the chest than most Lifeguardsmen, and indeed the organ that can evolve such music as that deep thunder-roll must be endowed with valves and material of no ordinary strength and dimensions. He has a wife and large family to be provided for out of the low notes of that instrument, and already an unpleasant suspicion dawns upon him that it will not last for ever. Great was the consternation in his home at Brompton when he caught cold last winter, and the cough has not left him yet, even in the fine spring weather. If he was to spit blood, the children would soon be hungry, and the poor mother at her wits' end.

The lady singers are in low evening dresses, and most of them wear their hair *à l'impératrice*. They are whispering and talking to each other with that busy good-humoured cordiality which the sex is prone to affect in public places, and those who have not brought bouquets with them are vehemently admiring the flowers of those who have. One sits a little apart from the rest; she is attired very simply in mourning, and carries a half-blown rose in her bosom. As she droops her head over the score in her hand, the tenor, who has something of a painter's taste, thinks she would make a pretty picture, with her white shoulders relieved by her black dress, and the nut-brown hair shading and hiding her face, while a sunbeam slanting through the window brings out a gold tinge on the glossy head. He is a soft-hearted, good-natured man, this tenor, and cherishes a romantic and self-denying adoration for many ladies, both in and out of the profession, and for this one especially, the more so that there is a quiet reserve in her manner by which he is abashed not a little, and that after he has said good-morning, he generally falters, puts his hands in his pockets, and becomes mute.

There is safety, however, in numbers, and his own good looks are no bad protection to a man in his dealings with the enemy. A *joli garçon* has generally more than one string to that bow of which the cord sometimes breaks with so sharp a twang, and a spice of admiration for himself is no bad antidote to too violent an infatuation about another. If you want a devoted lover, ladies, take an old man's advice, and choose an ugly one. He is vain, too, but his vanity is more easily managed than the other's; he is more impassioned,

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more constant, more submissive, and if you *do* break his heart, your own remorse will be a thought less keen when you are adding up the sum-total of your victims. Bar the pleasure of taking him away from somebody else, and after the first week he makes just as good a slave as a second Apollo would, and, say what you will, you know that you do not appreciate beauty as much as we do. You know that you are not so gentle, not so soft-hearted, nay, not half so refined as the so-called sterner sex. When do you see us take a repulsive being to our bosom, and cherish it there, unless it be for some extraneous object? She may be an heiress, or an authoress, or a good housewife, and there is a reason for it. But you! Beauty and the beast is so everyday an occurrence, I can scarce believe the story to be a fable. You go to the altar unhesitatingly with some monster whom his fellow-men cannot look upon without loathing. You not only marry him, I could forgive you that, but you love, and coax, and prize the wretch, and make him happy ever afterwards. I sometimes think this strange predilection originates in the instinctive jealousy and love of approbation so remarkable in the sex. Beauty thinks nobody else will care to interfere with Bruin, and it is pleasant to have even a beast all to herself; but old Flippant, for whose lengthened experience in such matters I have the profoundest respect, takes a wider view of the subject, and refers all such incongruities to the general principle of contradiction, and the impossibility of arguing from probability, expediency, or any other rational *data*, as to what a woman under any given circumstances will, or will not do, or let alone, or otherwise.

The singer in mourning seems very busy with her score, and the admiring tenor has not yet been able to obtain a glimpse of her face, still shaded by her thick hair worn deep and low over her temples, a fashion which she is probably well aware is exceedingly becoming to a wide fair forehead and a pair of arched brows, such as gives softness and feminine dignity to a woman's face. His attention, however, is almost entirely taken up by two very smart and lively ladies, who seem to despise the idea of reserving their vocal powers for a musical triumph, but are expending a liberal amount of breath and volume in lively conversation with each other, with the tenor, with the leader of the band, with any of the gentlemen who are disposed to bandy good-humoured jokes and lively repartee.

The bass alone sits apart from the rest. He looks very pale and weary, leaning his head upon his hands, and coughs

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more than once. There is a hard-working, careworn woman at Brompton, now clearing away the remnants of the children's dinner, whose heart would ache to hear that cough, who would bless the lady in mourning for looking up as she does from her task, and crossing the room so quietly, and laying her hand with such gentle sympathy on the sufferer's shoulder.

"You are worse to-day," she says, in a low tone of peculiar sweetness; "I did not forget you, and I have brought the lozenges, but I am sorry you require them."

He looks up quickly, and grasps her cordially by the hand.

"God bless you!" he says, in his deep, full voice; "you never forget anyone but yourself. My little girls call you the good angel, and, indeed, I think you *are* an angel."

She shakes her head, and smiles. Such a smile as brightens only a countenance where they are very rare, as decks it with a wild, painful, melancholy beauty, and leaves a sadder and more hopeless expression when it fades. She makes no other reply, and buries herself again in her score, while the bass shakes his honest head with a puzzled air, half pitiful, half provoked.

"I wish I could make her out," he thinks, as he dwells on her kindness, her reserve, her abstraction, her avoidance of intimacies, and backwardness in showing friendship, save to those who are in sickness or otherwise distressed. "I suppose she isn't happy, that's the truth. She has never got over it, and she's thinking of him still."

They have often talked about her in the little parlour at Brompton; and this is the verdict to which, after a masterly summing up from the former, husband and wife invariably arrive. Poor honest bass! you have lived for five-and-forty years in this specious world, twenty of which you have spent in a happy reciprocity of confidence, with the frankest and most affectionate of wives. You think you can read a woman's heart. Bless you! you know no more of it than a child!

And now the doors are open. The professionals move from their retiring-room to take their seats in the body of the hall. The leader of the band assumes his baton with a martial air, and the concert begins. The seats are nearly all full. Very few tickets have been given gratis. There is a dense crowd about the doors; and notwithstanding the many rival attractions of a summer's afternoon in the metropolis, there is every reason to believe that it will pay.

Meantime, a barouche is waiting three doors lower than the steps of White's, Lady Olivia's prudence and propriety for-

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bidding her to draw up exactly opposite the well-filled window of that exclusive club, from which critical and unprejudiced eyes would be sure to pass in review herself, her niece, her bonnet, her gloves, her parasol, nay, the very liveries of her white-stockinged servants, not to mention the heavily-plated harness and stately appearance of her bay carriage-horses champing and stamping in the sun, concluding in all probability with a sweeping condemnation of the whole. So she waits for Gilbert three doors off, and the frown darkens ominously on her stern forehead as the minutes pass and her son does not appear.

"Very odd of Gilbert," says Lady Olivia in her harshest tone; "he knows how I hate waiting, and does it on purpose, I believe."

"Men are always unpunctual," answers Lady Gertrude, looking very smiling and *rayonnante* in another killing little bonnet. "Is it not so, Mr Gordon?"

Mr. Gordon answers not much to the purpose; he is thinking of something else. He is a student of human nature, this gentleman, during his play-hours, and takes a good deal of relaxation out of Lady Gertrude and her inexplicable ways. He is speculating now intensely on why she should have secured him so long ago for the back seat of the barouche, and why she should have been so fidgety all the way along Piccadilly, and why she was so good-humoured now during the painful process of waiting for Gilbert; above all, why there should be to-day, of all days, a scarce perceptible tone of softness in the few observations she makes to himself, and a shade as of pity and compunction cast over that usually thoughtless and buoyant nature. Topics of reflection, Mr Gordon, which may well make you ponder, and which, with all your keen-sightedness, you will find it no easy task to understand.

Lady Olivia will wait no longer; regardless of a suppliant look from her niece, she is in the act of giving orders to drive on, when the truant appears with his mouth full of chicken-sandwich, and in his usual good-humoured bantering way carries the war at once into the enemy's country by accusing them of keeping him waiting.

"I have a bouquet for each of you, too," he says, handing them with a good deal of mock dignity to the ladies, "and a cauliflower coming later from Covent Garden for John, who is a practical man."

The gentleman alluded to looks practical enough as he turns a sharp keen eye upon the cousins. His exterior pre-

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sents a marked contrast to that of his friend. Power is the prevailing characteristic of John Gordon's physiognomy and figure. The bold, well-cut features, the clear, sallow complexion, the deep-set, glittering eye and close raven hair, are types of an iron physique and an iron will. His tones are short, sharp, and imperious; they seem to be propelled, so to speak, from the thin lips that close again as with a steel spring when they have gone forth. That mouth belongs to a man from whom you could never coax anything by persuasion, or wrest from him by force. His very dress, plain to simplicity and unpretending though it be, has a character and a peculiarity of its own; whilst the muscular figure combines in a rare degree great physical power with activity and insensibility to fatigue.

No woman ever yet thought John Gordon good-looking; at least none could ever be brought to say so. Quiet and unassuming as he was, they always affirmed that they were "a little afraid of him"; and perhaps they like being frightened, for they were always ready enough to sit by him, or dance with him again. I do not know whether Lady Gertrude admired his face, but she must have looked at it pretty often; and even now, though she buries her head in her cousin's bouquet, her eyes pass over it once with a strange, half-angry, half-pleading glance that does not escape him, as, indeed, nothing does, but that he cannot for the life of him fathom or understand. The next instant, however, she is talking so gaily and playfully, that even Lady Olivia thaws to the influence of the girl's merry, sunshiny manner; whilst Gilbert sits back at his ease amongst the cushions, submitting to be amused with the good-humoured, grand-seigneur indolence habitual to him, and that is not without its attractions to his companions of either sex.

So they reach the doors of the building where the concert is going on, and there is a vast deal of fuss and ceremony and parade about their alighting, and a policeman makes way for them authoritatively, and they take the seats provided for them with no small noise and bustle, to the just indignation of the audience, all of whom do the same thing constantly themselves, but who think it right now to betray marked disapproval, for our good-looking friend the tenor is pouring forth a strain of clear, continuous melody, sweet and luscious, like some rich liquid, of which it were shame and pity to lose the smallest drop. "Bravo!" says Gilbert with honest enthusiasm at the conclusion of the piece; and "Bravo!" echoes Lady Gertrude in more subdued tones, looking,

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nevertheless, sidelong at John Gordon's face to see whether he too approves. Nothing less than absolute perfection satisfies the latter; and his applause is less demonstrative than that of his companions. Lady Olivia is peering about through her glasses to see who is there; and a pause in the performances enables the well-pleased spectators to relax their attention and fall to conversing amongst themselves.

"I hate fine music," observes Gilbert, whose nervous system, truth to tell, is strung to a far higher pitch than he would have his friends believe, and who is ashamed, as well he may be, that he can turn pale and shiver for so unreal a cause as a thrilling stream of melody; "in fact, all music bores me rather than otherwise, though it's not quite so bad as dancing."

"Then why did you come?" asks Lady Gertrude, very justly accepting this last shaft of her indolent cousin as aimed especially at herself.

"Because you ordered me," was the reply, with one of Gilbert's sweetest smiles; and no woman's face that ever I saw had a softer, kindlier smile than his. "Because you ordered me; and I've been here half an hour already without wishing yet that I hadn't obeyed."

The girl put the bouquet he had given her to her face, and looked full at him over the flowers with her bright, speaking eyes.

"Then you like to do as I bid you," she said very low, and with a slight tremor in her voice, not quite in keeping with the triumphant expression of her glance.

Gilbert thought he had never seen her look so pretty. Something tenderer than admiration seemed to shoot through him as he eyed the proud young beauty, so refined, so delicate, so well-dressed, and so high-born. John Gordon's back was turned to the cousins, and he appeared intensely occupied with the stir caused by the re-entrance of the performers. As Gilbert lounged forward to read the programme, his head drooped nearer and nearer his companion's pretty hand, in its neat, well-fitting glove; perhaps his lip would have touched it even there, I hardly know, but his mother's measured tones broke in unexpectedly as she nudged the younger lady rudely with her elbow, and called her attention to some of the notabilities amongst the audience.

"There's Mrs. Mangonel, Gertrude—did you bow to her?—and her two daughters, and the Dowager Lady Visigoth."

"More like Boadicea than ever, and with nearly as little on her shoulders," whispered Lady Gertrude mischievously to her

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cousin; but Gilbert answered not, for a low sweet voice at that moment stole upon his senses, and he was feeling keenly, nay, painfully, in his inner being, that music did not bore him in the least.

It was a simple song enough—something about an angel and a child, of which the words and the poetical conception were below contempt, but they were wedded to a fanciful and melodious strain, an air that comprised but few notes, and yet into which you could not but feel the composer had thrown his whole art; an air that seemed less the elaborate conception of the brain than the irrepressible expression of an engrossing sensation in which suffering predominated. Such an air as recalls to us, we know not why, *that* sunset evening or *that* starry night—pshaw! that time of delicious folly which most of us have known, and to which the roughest and the harshest look back with strange wild longing and regret. What is this secret charm of music, that it seems to speak to all alike? Why should it thus probe us to the quick; and bring the past back so cruelly in its hopelessness, only because it *is* the past? Oh, for the fresh glad heart! oh, for the days gone by! and

“Oh! for the touch of a vanished hand,
And the sound of a voice that is still.”

The lady in mourning sang as if she felt it; after the first bar she seemed to forget her audience, and to lose herself completely in the strain. Gilbert, too, never took his eyes off the singer's face; and when she finished, and there arose a burst of applause from all the others, something like a tear stole down his cheek. Of course, he began to talk vehemently to his companions, but Lady Gertrude thought him less pleasant than usual, and all seemed relieved when the concert was over and it was time to go. The gentlemen put the ladies into the carriage, and walked arm-in-arm back to St. James's Street, preserving for full five minutes a dead silence. At the end of that period Gilbert made the following remarkable observation—

“That's a pretty woman, John.”

And although they had neither of them mentioned her before, they must both have been thinking of the singer in black, for John replied—

“Would be rather good-looking if she'd more colour. I know something about her; she's a Mrs. Latimer.”

CHAPTER V

ADA



HE *was* a pretty woman, and I don't agree with John Gordon that she wanted an atom more colour. I have seldom seen a face on earth that I thought could compare with that of Ada Latimer. Yet, perhaps, to all men she might not have shown as she did to me. I have heard her beauty discussed, doubted, made light of, denied; yet when she came into a room, people's eyes brightened, and their countenances kindled

as if it were a pleasure to be near her, to watch her graceful manner and soft gentle ways. She must have been very good to look at, too, or her own sex would never have been so fond of pulling her beauty to pieces, and demolishing it, as it were, item by item, till they finished by proving that she was positively hideous—a perfect witch! God help the man, however, over whom such witches cast their spells! She had about her a nameless fascination, such as, happily for mankind, falls to the lot of but few women; such as, I am convinced, must have been possessed by Medea in the olden time, and to which I refer all the fables of those charms and love-philtres insisted on by the poets as forming the *pharmacopœia* of that seductive dame; such as enabled the swart Egyptian to take and reject emperor after emperor, as a modern belle does partner after partner in a ballroom, and to play with the civilised world as a child does with its ball; such as taught Mary Queen of Scots to make fools no less of grave statesmen than of iron warriors, inflicting madness on some and death on others, as the penalty of coming within the sphere of her attractions; such a charm, in short, as should be labelled “poison,” like any other deadly ingredient, and of which the

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most dangerous feature is the possessor's own unconsciousness of its power.

It is hopeless to attempt the description of a woman. All that is most attractive in her beauty can be rendered neither by pen nor pencil ; nay, not even by the boasted *fac-simile* of the photograph. Lustrous eyes, deep, and soft, and winning ; a colouring like the delicate pink of the inner petals of the moss rose ; silken hair, dark in the shade, and golden brown in the sun ; an oval face of the noblest Anglo-Saxon type, surmounted by the fairest, gentlest brow that was ever ploughed by care ; a rounded outline of form less that of the nymph than of the goddess, and the graceful yet dignified bearing of a queen. What is all this but a commonplace, good-looking person, defined in commonplace words as a botanist might define a rose ? Does it explain the charm that surrounds the woman, any more than a page of Loudon could convey the fragrance that clings about the flower ? Does it not utterly fail to paint that rarest and most dangerous combination, the ideal united with the physical type of womanly perfection, the form that can alike win devotion and command obedience—the beauty to dream of, to worship, and to caress ?

Ay ! she was this and she was that—good and gentle, and fair and fond, and so is many another ; but Ada was *lovable*, that's the truth ! and in that one word lies all the mystery and all the mischief. Her youth had not been an enviable one, and indeed her share of happiness in life was none of the largest. Is it not usually so with the most gifted of both sexes ? Are not the bravest and the best, the gentlest and the loveliest, doomed to pay a heavy price for their superiority over their kind ?—as if fate had resolved to equalise the lot of mortals ; nay, to bake the porcelain in a furnace seven times hotter than that of the common clay. I never see a man the envy of his fellows—I never look upon a woman the admiration of a ballroom—but I think of the proud head humbled, perhaps, and bowed to the very dust, when there are none to see ; of the sweet face writhing in sorrow on its pillow when the light is out, and hot tears can course each other down the winsome cheek unrestrained in the dark. Who can guess the wound that is draining the combatant's life away, so long as he keeps his head up and his vizor closed ?

I once overheard four words spoken that I have never been able to forget. It is years ago, and he who uttered them has gone long since to the rest for which he yearned so painfully, which he never found on earth ; which, perhaps, I alone

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of all others, knew to be the one desire of his tortured spirit—of his weary, aching heart. And thus it fell out that I heard the cry of his great agony. I had seen him in all the pride and exultation of social triumph. A week before he had won his election, and been chaired and cheered—for in those days such demonstrations were permitted by law—as popular candidate had never been chaired and cheered before. He possessed the fairest bride and the noblest fortune of three counties; he was young, handsome, high-spirited, and popular. That very day his favourite horse had won a cup, and I had myself witnessed rank and beauty and genius crowding round him, with homage and smiles and compliments, ay, and envy of his thrice-favoured lot. So as I walked homewards along a meadow-path, screened from the highroad by a double hedge, thick, briery, and fragrant with a load of May, I mused on all I had seen, and I said in my heart, “Surely this man must be happy!” And even while thus I thought, the tramp of his horse was on the other side of the hedge, as he, too, rode home alone, and I caught a glimpse through the blossoms of the fortunate one’s face. Oh! the weary, hopeless look of those contracted features I shall never forget, nor the stifled agony of the voice with which he said aloud, “O God! O God! how long!” looking up the while into the blue laughing sky. When I heard a week afterwards that he was dead, could I sorrow for him as the rest did; “cut off,” said they, “in his prime, with all that made life worth having at his feet”? Could I pity him, and bless myself with uplifted hands and murmur, “The ways of Providence are inscrutable,” according to the authorised formula provided for such cases? No; rather I thought wistfully with Job of those “which long for death and it cometh not, which rejoice exceedingly and are glad when they can find the grave.”

It is a good many years now since a gay and gallant young Englishman, spending a soldier’s leave in the capital of Austria, thought it expedient to fall in love with one of those Viennese damsels whose fascinations are so peculiarly fatal to the British heart. Major Glyn, like his countrymen in general, could not resist the smiling eyes, luxuriant tresses, and winning ways of a certain fair young Gräfinn, from whose gentle tones he acquired the worst of all possible German, to the detriment of his pronunciation, and the irremediable capture of his affections. But the major, though soft, was honest, and profoundly regardless of the fact that he had very little besides his pay, and that his bride’s fortune was barely sufficient to provide her with a *trousseau*; he married her out of hand at

the British Embassy, to the infinite disgust of his own family, who repudiated him ever afterwards, and brought her away to join his regiment in England as happy as if he had forty thousand a year.

These penniless marriages generally answer remarkably well at first. Whilst the bloom is on the thing, upholstery and gilding are very unnecessary decorations, and a dinner of herbs is a most piquant repast so long as you are in love with your cook. Most of us know the story of the vapid and *blasé* young gentleman who went to the Olympic with the late Lord Melbourne, and complained next day of the dull evening he had spent. "Hang the fellow!" said the light-hearted statesman, "couldn't he see the people in the streets, and the gaslights flaring on the lobsters in the fishmongers' windows? Wasn't that pleasure enough for *him*? What would a man have?"

And so say I, "What would a man have?" To have the right face opposite you every morning at breakfast, the right voice asking you to have more tea, the right smile shining to gladden and soften you for the whole day; in short, the right woman in the right place, is happiness enough for any man on this side the grave—so long as it lasts. Ay! there is the rub—the gilding is so apt to wear off, the colours so seldom stand. A man gives his all willingly enough for the Venus Anadyomene, but some fine morning he may wake up immeasurably disgusted to find he has got but a plaster of Paris cast. If he is wise, he raises it incontinently several inches on its pedestal, and spends the rest of his life in endeavouring to deceive himself and others as to the reality of the idol; if he is a fool, he dashes it to the earth and breaks it all to pieces and seeks out another, to be again disappointed, with the same result. In either case he wishes he had left the goddess alone.

Such, however, was not Major Glyn's fate. He often boasted, and with reason, that he was the happiest man in the British army. He had married the woman he loved, and he loved the woman he married (not necessarily a logical sequence), so he never found himself without strength and spirits to fight the battle of life. Always in active employment, he was enabled, though with little but his profession to depend upon, to live in tolerable comfort, as the saying is, from hand to mouth; nor, when a girl was born to them, did father or mother despair because there would be no fortune to leave their child. "God will provide," said the Gräfinn in her German accent; and the major was quite satisfied on his

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infant's behalf with the reversion. And so little Ada grew from a delicate, fragile baby into a rosy, saucy romp, always merry, fresh, gladsome, and wilful; welcome even in the stern area of the orderly-room, and almost as great a pet with his brother-officers as she was with her own papa.

But these happy days could not last for ever. The busy, energetic, light-hearted soldier found himself one morning unfit for duty. Before watch-setting that night he was "down with the fever," to use the regimental expression; and little Ada missed her accustomed dance to the music of the taptoo, which was hushed in consideration of the major's sickness. The next day she went to see him for five minutes, and never again. He was, indeed, loth to quit his darling; loth to quit the dear fond wife with whom he had never exchanged an unkind word; loth to quit his profession, his men, his hopes, and his useful, practical career; but he bowed his head to the stroke with courage and resignation. Nor did a word of complaint escape his lips, save that he said once, "It seems hard to leave you and the child; but I shall see you both again!"

Then the muffled drum was beat, and the soldiers marched with their arms reversed; and the charger with empty saddle followed his master to the grave, and the Gräfinn was a widow, and little Ada an orphan.

They struggled on for years as so many people do in the middle—or, perhaps, I should rather say, the lowest—of the upper ranks of life; struggled to keep up an appearance of respectability on an insufficient income—to *seem* if not to *be* above want—to retain a footing on that imaginary surface called society, which was continually slipping from beneath them, and everybody said they deserved great credit for their efforts, and pitied them exceedingly and assisted them not at all.

So little Ada grew from a rosy roundabout child into a tall slip of a girl; and the Gräfinn taught her all she knew herself, and lived only for her daughter, and was somewhat startled at last to find that daughter expanding into a full-grown woman, beautiful and admired, and actually sought after in marriage.

Now a young lady's first offer, like a young sportsman's first partridge, combines the two very agreeable elements of novelty and success. Nor does the one or the other devote much consideration to the intrinsic value of the bird in the bag. Ada never stopped to think whether the little flutter of triumph she experienced at Mr. Latimer's attentions was

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the result of vanity or affection, nor hesitated for an instant in assenting to mamma's avowed opinion "that Mr. Latimer was a very charming person, calculated to make any girl happy; that Ada ought to feel flattered and grateful at his proposal, and if she thought she could like him, had better accept him at once!"

The Gräfinn having made a love-match herself, and found it turn out remarkably well, was inclined strenuously to counsel matrimony, and held also the firm conviction of all foreigners—that nothing is so desirable for a young lady as an early marriage, before she can possibly know her own mind. There were besides many prudential considerations in favour of the match. The Gräfinn's health was delicate; her income very small. It was a great point to get Ada settled. She would then be no longer anxious about her dear child. She would miss her, indeed, sadly; but it was for Ada's happiness—doubtless for Ada's happiness—and the sooner it was concluded the better.

People differ so much in their ideas of happiness. Many, and those doubtless the wisest and most reflective, hold that it consists in plate, carriage-horses, and a punctual return of their neighbours' visits; others, and these are justly scouted for their folly, opine that it flourishes best in a soil of kindness and community of ideas—nay, that it must be warmed by the sunshine of mutual affection. Alas! for those who have discovered that none of these accessories can ensure its duration; that it is no exhalation which rises from earth, but a dew that descends from heaven. Alas for them! because such knowledge comes only through great sorrow and anguish of heart, yet is it a lesson that shall profit them unspeakably hereafter.

So Ada listened to mamma with a glowing cheek and a pleased smile, and told her to accept Mr. Latimer for her that afternoon when he called, and went about her simple preparations, nothing doubting but that she had done all for the best, nor dreamed in her innocence that she was about to barter her woman's birthright for a mess of pottage.

It is not the sorrow that must be sustained in an unhappy union which is to be dreaded; that can be borne like other tangible evils. It is the galling reflection on the joy that has been missed.

Latimer was one of those comely, cheerful, plausible individuals who are so popular with the world. The men voted him "such a good fellow," because, forsooth, he was ready at any hour to eat and drink, to play whist, and smoke, or join

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in the diversion that was uppermost. Always well got up, thanks to his tailor—always fresh-coloured, thanks to his digestion, which was indeed faultless—constitutionally good-humoured, and displaying habitually that superficial cordiality which supplies its possessor with so many acquaintances, and so few friends; he was an acquisition to every party of pleasure, a welcome guest in every fast-going circle, a necessary feature of every race-meeting or other public gathering of the thoughtless and the gay. The very gipsy-women at Ascot knew Latimer too well to offer to tell him his fortune. "You've got it in your face, my dear," they would say, peering roguishly up into his well-favoured countenance, flushed with luncheon and success. "There's luck in the tone of your voice, and luck in the turn of your eye, and it's no use to look in your hand, with such beautiful whiskers as yours. Give the poor gipsy half a crown!" Nor was the flattery undeserved. Latimer's whiskers were indeed worthy of the pains he bestowed upon them. Shiny, curly, and voluminous, they possessed all the elements of grandeur; and their proprietor was once heard modestly to observe that he owed most of his success in life to the assistance of these magnificent appendages.

I do not think he was quite so great a favourite with ladies as with men. The gentler sex have wonderful discrimination in character, and an intuitive perception of that which is artificial or insincere. They could not but be amused with his small-talk, and gratified by his attentions; yet every woman, on first meeting him, vowed she considered him bad style; and one very great lady to whom he was presented—herself by no means choice in her selection of devotees—looked him well over, and turned her back upon him thenceforward, with the sweeping condemnation "that he had not the slightest pretensions to the character of a gentleman!"

So he never penetrated quite into the highest circles of that world in which he lived; nor did the exclusion affect him in the smallest degree. He led a smoking, jovial, free-and-easy life, chiefly in a class of society which the great lady alluded to above would have termed third-rate, and a good deal amongst artists, professionals, actors and actresses, singers, and the like. By degrees he lapsed entirely into the companionship of the latter; and after he had spent his patrimony, had serious thoughts of going on the stage, when the death of a relative put him once more in possession of a competency, and deprived the drama of a very indifferent performer. He was about two-thirds through this last fortune,

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when the Power that arranges these matters put it into his head that he should like to make Ada Mrs. Latimer.

Poor Ada! The Gräfinn never found out the mistake she had made. The girl gave her hand to Latimer; and had he truly loved her—had he even cared for her with the cold temperate affection of a relative, doubtless her heart would in time have followed the gift. But ere she had been married a very few weeks, the truth began to dawn upon her that they were utterly unsuited to each other. His innate vulgarity of mind and feeling was continually offending her own refinement—that true refinement which is the essential characteristic of every pure-hearted woman. She could not conceal from herself that he was utterly selfish, utterly unprincipled; and that the very partiality which he had shown for her beauty, and which had led him into a step so contrary to all his maxims of worldly prudence as marriage, was fast fading away in her daily society. Can anything be so galling to a woman's pride as this?—to feel that she has sacrificed her whole existence to a man who wanted nothing but the shell, and see him gradually getting tired of her; the while, he is as ignorant of the *real* woman, the mind and feelings, and, so to speak, the kernel of the fruit, as an utter stranger. Had she loved him, it would have broken her heart; as it was, it only broke her spirit. She determined, however, that the Gräfinn should never know how unhappy she was; and day after day, this fair young creature performed her part with a noble hypocrisy, and smiled cheerfully in her mother's face as if she were the happiest wife in the world.

Then came pecuniary difficulties, angry consultations, and constant humiliation. In the midst of it all, the poor Gräfinn died, and Ada felt, when she had lost her last friend, as if now indeed she had experienced the very keenest form of woe.

"I can never be so unhappy again," said Ada, as she dried her tears after her mother's funeral.

We have most of us thought so more than once in our lives. Dare we defy the future to equal the suffering of the past?

CHAPTER VI

THE ADVENTURER

IN addition to his other vices, or, as he chose to term them, his amiable weaknesses, Latimer was a gambler. Speculation, indeed, seemed to be an essential ingredient of his character, and he liked it for its own sake, for the excitement of its vicissitudes, the daily ups and downs of winning and losing, perhaps more than for the actual lucre which was the ostensible object of his ventures. Not satisfied with the chances and changes of the turf, he loved to hazard considerable sums at all games of skill or fortune, nay, to dabble occasionally in that treacherous river of Pactolus which mortals call the Stock Exchange, a flood of which the golden waters are so hot as to scald the fingers of all but the wariest and most experienced manipulators. Such a character is ill adapted to make a good husband to a woman whose value he is incapable of appreciating, and of whose beauty he is beginning to get tired. So matters verged rapidly to a conclusion; and at last came the explanation and the climax.

They lived in a pretty villa on the Thames, embowered in sweetbriar and honeysuckles, with a sunny lawn stretching down to the waterside, and the rich laburnums, the "golden rain" trees of Ada's mother-tongue, drooping overhead as they swayed and glittered in the scented breeze of spring. It was a snug retreat, within easy distance of London, as Latimer well knew, yet retired and rural as a hermitage to Ada, who was content to dwell there in solitude week after week, whilst he amused himself in the rambling, dissipated, good-for-nothing society which had now become his natural element. Occasionally, by her husband's desire, she would receive his associates at the Cottage, and exerted herself with such good effect to entertain them, that "Latimer's sweet wife" became a synonym for all that was loveliest and best on earth, even amongst the blackest sheep of that vagrant flock. Many a *roué*, desperate and reckless, felt something strangely like a pang in his worn, bad heart, as he bethought

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him what a different man he might have been with such a woman as that to care for, and turned from his host with a feeling nearly akin to disgust, as he observed the utter want of deference and regard with which he treated that gentle and lovely lady.

Ada bore with it all, sadly, but uncomplainingly. Passionately fond of music, she cultivated her talents to the utmost; and amongst all her husband's heterogeneous store of acquaintances, those who made harmony their profession seemed always the most acceptable at the pleasant luncheons or fascinating little dinners for which the Cottage was notorious.

It was a fine summer morning, after one of these *réunions*, and Ada was moving about amongst her flowers, "herself the rose of all." The French windows of the Cottage opened to the lawn, and within might have been seen an elaborate breakfast service of massive silver on a little round table, spread with a snowy cloth, and bearing a luxurious repast, whereof a tall bottle and a bouquet of roses formed two conspicuous features. Anon, emerged into the garden a stout, good-looking gentleman, bright and fresh as the summer morn itself, with ambrosial whiskers of extraordinary magnitude, a richly embroidered velvet dressing-gown, and an amber-tipped *chibouque* in his mouth. Puffing forth volumes of fragrant Latakian fumes, he paced leisurely down the smooth-shaven sward.

"Always busy amongst those miserable flowers, Ada," he remarked carelessly, without removing the pipe from his mouth. "I wonder you're not tired of roses and lilies and daffydown-dillies. Don't you find this place cursedly slow?"

She looked quickly up at him. Woman as she was, a biting retort could not but occur to her as she contrasted his life with her own; but she swallowed it down, and replied meekly—

"You know I like gardening; and surely this is pleasanter than hot, smoky London."

He yawned, and crushed an insect beneath his gold-and-velvet slipper.

"You don't like London, eh?"

"Hate it," was the reply, honestly enough; and she knelt down to tie up a drooping carnation.

"I'm sorry for that," he answered, as if speaking on a matter of trivial importance; "for I expect you'll have to live there for some years. I've sold the Cottage, Ada, furniture,

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fixtures, and all. Sold it within a hundred of its full value, and lost every rap of the money into the bargain!"

She was so accustomed to these uncomfortable communications, so used to reverses, that she only turned a shade paler, and opened her large eyes as he went on—

"I'm about told out, Ada, that's the fact. Everything has gone wrong lately, just as it did, I remember, in Belphegor's year. What a cracker I stood to win on him and the Rejected! Well, I've never had a turn of luck since Northampton; and the funds went down seven-eighths just after I bought in; and the South-African railway shares are not worth so much waste paper; and the mines in Paraguay seem to produce nothing but fire-damp and bilge-water; and indigo has gone down twenty-five per cent. It's a drug in the market—nobody buys it. Egad, I shall look blue enough with all I've got on my hands! Lucky I didn't pay cash for it. And I've bills enough out to paper the dining-room; and, in short, Ada, I've seen this coming on a long time, but I wouldn't bother *you* about it."

"Why didn't you?" she said, laying her shapely hand on his arm with something akin to a caress.

Had he trusted in her, and gone to her for sympathy and comfort, she could almost have loved him even then. This was not his object, however, and it would only have encumbered him; so he refilled his pipe, and proceeded with a cheerful smile, like that of a man detailing his possessions or his gains.

"Money in the funds, none; landed property, four acres of garden and meadow-land—sold; indigo, sixty-seven chests bond—not paid for; shares and scrip, about fifteen hundred; liabilities, from six to seven thousand; personal property, one chestnut cab-horse, with plated harness to match—seized; also several exceedingly well-made suits of clothes—worn out; and one bottle of first-growth chateau-margaux on the breakfast-table—empty! I think, Ada, it is almost time for me to make a bolt of it."

She was unprepared for so complete a smash as he described. She could but weep a little, and wring her hands at her own helplessness.

"Can nothing be done?" she said; "is it worse than it ever was before? Will matters not come right in time, William? you have so often been in difficulties."

She had not called him by his Christian name for many a long day; but her heart warmed to him now, for he was in distress, or at least she thought he was. It was Sunday, and

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the bells were ringing for morning service. Instinctively she moved towards the house as if to prepare for church, but Latimer placed himself before her.

"Don't go to-day, Ada," said he; "it's no use making a secret of it any longer; I'm off this evening for Australia!"

She sank down on a garden-seat in a state of utter prostration and astonishment.

When a man meditates any deed of unusual harshness or injustice, he generally lashes himself into such a state of anger as shall goad him to the necessary pitch of hard-heartedness; and although Latimer was constitutionally a good-humoured person enough, he thought it incumbent on him at this juncture to prove that his own ruin was chiefly his wife's fault; so he puffed savagely at his *chibouque*, advancing to the attack under cover of the smoke.

"I've never had a chance, you see, Ada, encumbered as I have been. Living down here, I have been obliged to neglect matters of great importance in London; and with my small income, how could I afford the expense of two establishments?" (Of the truth of this reasoning, Latimer himself was the best judge; but if the Cottage was his only home, he was strangely belied.) "Then I've been unlucky at play, cursedly unlucky. Why, only last night when we all went up from here, Macer broke the bank at Number Nine, whilst I was losing every shilling I had in the world at Poulterer's. I can't be in two places at once, can I? Everything went on well enough till I married, since then I've been so hampered and bothered, I've had no time for anything. There, it's no use crying. You'll do far better without me; and perhaps when I get to the other side of the globe altogether, there's a chance that the luck may turn."

Again, had she loved him, how such a heartless speech would have dried her tears and scorched her brain, but her holier feelings at least were unwounded, and she only suffered from an oppressive sense of loneliness and injustice; so she hid her face in her hands, and wept on.

"I shall get away to-night," he proceeded, his good-humour returning with the prospect of travelling, and the indulgence of his innate love of change and excitement. "Being Sunday, I'm safe, you see, and I can run down to Southampton and embark before daybreak to-morrow. I bought some lots two or three hundred miles from Sydney last year on spec, and have never been able to get rid of them. It's the only estate I've got left now, and I ought to go and live on it. I'm not a bad hand at roughing it,

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Ada, though I like to have things⁷ shipshape when I can." He pointed as he spoke to the pretty house, the very type of elegance and comfort. "But after all, it's not the first downer I've had by a good many; and if it was not for leaving you, I shouldn't care so much about it."

"May not I go with you?" she said, looking quickly up at him with a wistful, searching glance.

Latimer's face elongated visibly. He had never contemplated the affair from this point of view. He waved his pipe vaguely, as though to convey an idea of indefinite space, and observed doubtfully—

"Why, it's a long voyage, you see, and a wild country when you get there, and everything quite in the rough, and no arrangements made. I think I had better go first, and see how things are. In short, Ada, you'd be infernally in the way, and that's the truth!"

She seemed quite satisfied with so conclusive an answer, and never again reverted to the subject; but busied herself with preparations for his comfort, and inquiries as to his supply of ready money, which was indeed of no inconsiderable amount, and saw his things packed up, and took his directions as to how to make the best of the broken remnant of their fortunes, never repining nor reproaching him that starvation seemed about to stare *her* in the face; and so the afternoon wore on, and a cab came to the front gate of the villa, and it was time for him to be gone.

A bystander might scarce have supposed he saw a parting between husband and wife, perhaps for ever, who had witnessed that well-dressed happy-looking gentleman spring gaily into the cab that was to take him to London, counting his luggage with an experienced eye, and rolling an unlighted cigar between his fingers; and that pale, yet composed and quiet lady going to and fro from the door to the carriage with cloaks and wraps, and such articles as are always forgotten till the moment of departure. Yet Latimer's voice was very hoarse, and there was an unusual moisture in his eyes as he bid her the last farewell, and she grew paler and paler, till her face was like the face of a corpse, as she stood at the door of the villa, gazing wistfully after the cab till it was out of sight.

Her last action had been to press into his hand a small sealed packet, which her husband naturally opened as soon as he was fairly on his road to London. It contained the few jewels and all the ready money poor Ada possessed. Deserted, and in poverty, she could still despoil herself for

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the sake of one who had caused her unvarying sorrow and discomfort. This time the tears fairly filled Latimer's eyes.

"What a trump that girl is!" said he, with so loud an oath as to startle even the imperturbable cabman who drove him. "Why couldn't I like her better? Why couldn't I? Confound it! you're far better without me! but I'll never part with the bracelet, my poor Ada! Never, as long as I live, *never!*"

Heartless, unfeeling as the man was, he separated it from the rest of the trinkets, wrapped it up carefully, and laid it tenderly in his bosom. Then he drove on more comfortable, feeling as if he had made his wife some amends, and joined a convivial party of fellow-profligates whom he had engaged to meet at an early Greenwich dinner, previous to his departure by the night train, in something like his accustomed hilarity and spirits. Latimer's principle, I need hardly say, was to take all the pleasure that came to his hand; and so, although he had left his home that day a ruined man, and was about to be self-exiled, perhaps for life, from his country, there were still a few hours of the evening to be filled up, and how could they be better employed than in eating bread-and-butter and whitebait, and drinking success to his own voyage in Mr. Hart's sunniest champagne? If a thought of the pale face he had left ever did disturb him, which is doubtful, he felt the bracelet next his heart, and as bumper after bumper disappeared and mounted to his brain, he began to think "he wasn't such a bad fellow after all. Why should a man's efforts be hampered by a woman he didn't care for—wife or no wife? particularly in a new country—nobody could control circumstances—hang it! he had done the best he could—no fellow could do more."

So his friends drank his health, and a "pleasant voyage to him," and Latimer paid the bill, and they saw him off by the train, and thus tolerably comfortable in body, and by no means uneasy in mind, the exile hummed "Cheer, boys, cheer," and smoked alternately, half way to Southampton.

Ada gazed after the cab that took away her husband till it had turned the corner of the road and was fairly gone, then she went back into the drawing-room, looking strangely forlorn and deserted now; and burying her face in the sofa-cushions, gave way to a passion of tears. After this she prayed long and earnestly on her knees, and rose up composed and comforted. Sore, so to speak, and wearied with agitation, yet with a new and startling sensation of relief and liberty at her heart.

CHAPTER VII

GANZ ALLEIN

THERE were housekeeping bills to be settled, there were servants to be paid off and dismissed, there were certain lady's knick-knacks and trifles of Ada's own to be disposed of before the too surely impending execution should be put into the house, and these matters had to be arranged and attended to by the lone and helpless woman. And then after all was done, after sustaining reproach and insult from one creditor, and coarse pity, almost as hard to bear, from another — after wrangling with a broker's man, who persisted in calling her "miss," for her mother's miniature, and eventually being compelled to purchase her own property, after seeing the very sanctuary of her home profaned by strangers, and her household gods shattered upon her hearth, poor, friendless Mrs. Latimer had to betake her to a cheap and dirty London lodging, and sit down with her hands before her to consider what she should do next. Once, and once only, she revisited the Cottage. The laburnums had drooped and faded now; the lawn, that used to be so trim, was patched and ragged with a rank growth of verdure, the carnations were trodden down, the roses withered or over-blown, and a carpet hung outside the front bedroom window. She never went near the place again.

Man prides himself on his courage in facing danger, on his endurance of hardship, his dogged resistance under difficulties, in short, on what he calls his pluck. I do not think this quality is monopolised by the stronger sex. I believe a stouter heart often beats under a pair of stays than under a steel cuirass. My own idea is that a brigade of Amazons could conquer the world. The great difficulty would be to provide a brigadier. Who is to command these heroines? who is to enforce obedience in the muslin ranks of the invincibles? Not one of their own sex assuredly, and more assuredly still not one of ours. Mrs.

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Latimer, brought up with all the refinements and comforts of a gentlewoman, and after her marriage surrounded by the luxuries which never fail to pervade an establishment over which ruin is impending, found herself compelled to look absolute want in the face. Not for a moment did she quail before the grim antagonist. Like a brave commander, she sat down and calculated her resources. They were very slender; but she had a hopeful, trusting heart to back them, and she never despaired that they would prove enough. She must do something to gain her own livelihood, that was obvious; the humble store of ready money was melting day by day, and when that was gone! it would not do to dwell upon the possibility. Her rare talent had not been left uncultivated; she had worked and studied during her long solitary hours at the Cottage, till she had attained a degree of science and execution rarely equalled by an amateur. She would become a music-mistress—if need were, she would sing in public for her bread.

And here her acquaintance with the professionals stood her in good stead. No class of society is so ready to lend a helping hand to the unfortunate as that which itself derives a precarious subsistence from art — precarious, because art is but an ornament, and not a necessity of existence. My lord makes a memorandum of the case for future consideration, and bows his suppliant out with a cold smile. The thriving tradesman gilds his coarse jest or coarser rebuke with a present alms, but peremptorily declares that no future application must be made in the same quarter. It is the artist alone who affords sympathy as well as assistance, who gives ungrudgingly from his small means, and wishes it were more; above all, who displays a personal interest in reverses and misfortunes such as he knows may at some future time impede his own career. Which of us but has felt the inestimable value of a friend who makes our case his own? who lends us a helping hand out of our trouble, not dryshod on the brink, but wading himself knee-deep in the mire? who binds up our wounds and puts us on his own beast, and pays our score into the bargain? Ay! that good Samaritan must have dwelt in a land infested by thieves; must have himself known what it was to be robbed and wounded, so he had the heart to aid as well as to pity the maltreated traveller, and poured oil into his wounds, and tenderly lifted his gasping brother from the plain.

No sooner did Mrs. Latimer make it known that she

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required assistance, than friends gathered round her far more numerous than she could have supposed. Ada was not without her faults. At the core of her gentle, kindly nature was a leavening of indomitable pride, and I fear she experienced more suffering from some of these well-meant offers of assistance than she had done from many an effort of privation and self-denial. A beginning, however, must be made; one introduction leads to another; and thus it is that the bees get what is called a "connection" amongst the drones. It was not long ere the first step was gained; the bass singer whom I have already mentioned, and who had eaten many a good dinner of Mrs. Latimer's providing, had made the very roof-tree of the Cottage shake to his tones, had recommended her to a young lady in the Regent's Park who was anxious to take singing-lessons; the terms were higher than she expected. It was a most fortunate opening; there was nothing more to be done but to begin. So on a hot, dusty, glaring day early in August, the music-mistress left her humble lodging to commence this first essay in gaining her daily bread. A week ago, she would have thought that such an opportunity as the present would have made her perfectly happy; now she dreaded and almost loathed it, though she reproached herself for ingratitude the while, and took herself bitterly to task for weakness of purpose and want of courage. At times she felt as if the gallant spirit within could face and conquer any difficulties, but at times, also—and who shall blame her?—the tears sprang to her eyes as she thought of her friendless and unprotected position, of her dreary lot, her young days darkened, her young beauty wasted in the mere struggle to live, her capacity for happiness and for making happy so completely thrown away! Who shall say why these things are so? Why the warmest heart must sometimes be the saddest and the loneliest! Why the kindest nature must so often be driven back upon itself, to sour and weary and deteriorate! So little, so very little, would make some so happy. And yet that little is sternly and consistently denied. It is not for us to penetrate these things. The Great Artificer of all is the best judge. Day by day we see the round man in the square hole. We only know that all the struggling in the world will not make his prison one whit less angular and uncomfortable.

Revolving such thoughts as these, Mrs. Latimer, in the quietest and simplest attire, crossed the New Road at the top of Portland Place, and, as she did so, narrowly escaped being knocked down by a high-stepping brown cab-horse that was

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wasting a deal of action (considering the time of year), and throwing about a vast quantity of froth as he champed and churned under the skilful guidance of a pair of lavender-coloured gloves, the only portions visible of the occupier of the cab. The lady was unconscious of her danger; the gentleman totally unaware of her proximity. They passed within a horse's length, yet neither saw the other's face. Mrs. Latimer, with her indigenous good taste, could not but approve of the *tout ensemble* that had so nearly knocked her down as it rattled by, but she had far other thoughts to occupy her mind than dark green panels and high-stepping cab-horses; whilst Gilbert Orme—for Gilbert it was who owned the lavender gloves aforesaid—was yawning his way out of town in a state of weariness and vacuity which forbade him to take the slightest interest in any sublunary consideration. He was *bored* with the London season, yet leaving it with no feelings of relief or excitement. He was on his way to a Scotch mountain, where he expected to be *bored* by the society of too many intimate friends and too great a quantity of game. He was *bored* with the prospect of a railway journey of some five hundred miles to be accomplished with a break at a north country hotel. It was a *bore* stopping on the way; but then it was a *bore* travelling all night. He was even *bored* with the self-imposed task of driving his own cab to the station, and not five minutes before had caught himself almost envying the cheerful face of a jolly drayman, whose waggon blocked the street. He was thinking what a weary, useless life his own was—how he would like to have an object for which to exert himself—something to make him eager and energetic and anxious, ay, even if it made him unhappy—something to scheme for, and think of, and fret about—something to care for—something to love.

And he passed her within three paces, and drove on all unconsciously to the London and North-Western Railway; but we will not anticipate, and our business is now with the lady rather than the gentleman.

Mrs. Latimer walked on till she arrived at the gate of a pretty detached villa, the entrance to which, with its trim lawn and well-swept gravel-drive, reminded her a little of the Cottage. It was, however, a far larger and more stately residence, and everything about it, from the fat spaniel stretching itself in the sun to the puffy footman who opened the door, denoted affluence and comfort.

"Is Miss Jones at home?" asked the music-mistress, conquering a mixed feeling of pride and shyness at a gulp.

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"Yes, my lady," answered the man, a thorough London servant, who had only accepted the appointment with Alderman Jones, as he said, "temporarily, for country air," and whose *savoir vivre* prompted him that so plainly dressed and engaging a lady calling at that early hour must be a countess at least. "Step this way, my lady, if you please!"

Remorse tore that official's heart, and poisoned his one-o'clock dinner, when he ascertained the real business of the visitor. In the meantime, Mrs. Latimer followed her conductor upstairs, summoning all her courage for the ordeal. At the first landing-place she encountered a rubicund old gentleman with a bald head and a white neckcloth, who first begged her pardon, as it should seem, for taking the liberty of going downstairs in his own house, and then stopped her further progress by the summary process of placing his corpulent person immediately in front of her.

"Madam," said the old gentleman, with a ludicrous mixture of profound deference and startling abruptness, "pardon the liberty I take in asking, but are you going upstairs to give my daughter a singing-lesson?"

She bowed silently in the affirmative. "This, then," she thought, "must be the parent Jones. I wonder if his daughter's voice is equally difficult to modulate."

"Not with that pale face—I'll be—I beg your pardon—not with that pale face! You don't go a step farther. This way, ma'am, this way. You'll excuse me. John, the sherry, directly; and a biscuit, and some fruit! And let Miss Jones know. You'll find this the coolest room in the house. Lord! how tired she looks; and what a knave that husband of her's must be!"

The alderman had two little peculiarities, which rendered him at first a somewhat startling acquaintance—one was a habit of speaking out his thoughts and checking himself too late, which, though inconvenient, is by no means a very uncommon failing; and the other, a practice of deriving his metaphors and other figures of speech from the noble game of whist, of which, though a moderate player, he was an ardent admirer. Albeit a trifle choleric, he was kindly, jovial, good-natured, and generous; loved his only daughter Bella, as he still loved her mother in her grave at St. John's Wood; and believed old sherry to be the true *elixir vitæ*, and an unfailing remedy for all diseases, whether of body or mind.

With his own hand he poured out a large glass of that reviving liquid for Mrs. Latimer. He had heard her story, and pitied her sincerely; nor was he satisfied till she had drained

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every drop, and the colour had returned to her cheek, and the brightness to her eye. Then Alderman Jones began again.

“Bella’s dressing, Mrs. Latimer. A late riser; so was her poor mother. You should have known *her*, my dear madam. That woman was one in a million. There’s her picture. Yes, it’s very like, but wants her sweet smile. Ay, ay, we were very happy together, too happy to last. But it’s a blessed lot. Nothing equals a happy marriage! By Jove! there’s a misdeal! Have a little more sherry, Mrs. Latimer. No? You’re wrong, I think. I got it at Discount’s sale last year. Poor fellow! he knew what sherry was; and now, he’s left his wife and family, and gone off without a penny to Austr——; Hang it! I was deuced near revoking again. Here’s Bella!”

Luckily for the alderman, his daughter made her appearance at this juncture; and bowing kindly to Mrs. Latimer, rang for her late breakfast; and in five minutes, with her frank, almost hoydenish manner, and her kind, good heart, made the music-mistress feel completely at home. She was a black-eyed, black-haired, fresh-coloured girl, with a broad comely face, and a broad hearty smile; such a girl as looks more in place on a dairy-floor than behind the curtain of an opera-box, and yet with a degree of true refinement in her honest womanly nature that might put many a great lady to the blush. She turned papa round her finger, did exactly what she pleased, and enjoyed her London life and her London pleasures as such things can only be enjoyed at nineteen.

“You must teach me to sing beautifully, Mrs. Latimer,” said she, before they had been five minutes at the pianoforte, “as beautifully as you do yourself. I shall not be a bit afraid of you. I can see already that you are not the least cross.”

Such was Mrs. Latimer’s first attempt at gaining a livelihood, and successful in itself, it led to success in many others. A fast friendship sprung up between her and the Joneses, cemented on their part by every kindly office they could imagine, and recommendations without end. The music-mistress soon found she had as much to do as she could find time for, and was even able to send out remittances to her good-for-nothing husband in Australia. The second of these donations was returned from Sydney with an intimation that William Latimer was no more. At the time at which my story opens, Ada had thus been eighteen months a widow, and was one of the sweetest English singers in London.

CHAPTER VIII

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I MUST begin my story again, taking what seamen call a fresh departure from a point subsequent to the events already detailed. Such of my characters as have appeared on the stage must be marshalled anew, fitted with proper dresses and decorations from the wardrobe, and so ushered up to the footlights, exulting in their respective parts. For those who may come on hereafter, I must crave indulgence, if not applause. Let the pit suck their oranges with forbearance, if not satisfaction, the boxes smother their yawns, the gallery abstain from hisses. Tragedy or comedy, touching melodrama or broad farce, the curtain must fall at last on all alike; so in real life—clouds or sunshine, storm or calm, loling on patent springs, or trudging footsore through the mire—have but patience, brother :

“Be the day weary or never so long,
At length it ringeth to even-song.”

Alderman Jones is in an omnibus bound for the bank ; John Gordon is in a counting-house in the City, “counting out his money” ; Bella is eating bread-and-butter, if not “bread and honey,” at the villa in the Regent’s Park ; Lady Olivia in Belgrave Square is adding up her butcher’s book with a gold enamelled pencil ; Lady Gertrude reading her French novel upstairs ; Ada Latimer is preventing two little girls at Bayswater from mangling a duet ; and Gilbert Orme, in his bachelor’s lodgings in Green Street, has already finished breakfast, though it is but twelve o’clock.

It is the day after the morning concert to which he escorted his mother and cousin. Gilbert whistles with considerable execution (he learnt the accomplishment years ago at West Acres, from the keeper’s eldest boy, now assistant to a travelling showman), and he has whistled a simple plaintive air that he heard yesterday for the first time over and over again ; yet by the expression of his face it does not

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seem that he whistles like the ploughboy, "for want of thought."

Enter to him Lord Holyhead, an intimate friend, some few years his senior, who has admittance at all hours. That nobleman first examines his manly and military-looking person in every glass in the room, then throws himself into an arm-chair, hatted, gloved, booted, and spurred, with his riding-whip in his hand, lights a cigar, gets it well under weigh, and finally condescends to bid good-morrow to his host.

"Well, Gilbert, how goes it, my boy?"

To which Gilbert, as becomes one of the upper ten thousand, replies with classic elegance—

"Nicely, thank ye, Nobs! How's yourself?"

This effort achieved, the friends smoke on in solemn silence. It is scarcely necessary to observe that "Nobs" is Holyhead's nickname, originally acquired at Eton, and, like Falstaff's "Jack," only to be used by his familiars. He is a nobleman of considerable energy and determination, a staunch friend, an uncompromising foe; not sweet-tempered when crossed, but with tact and self-control, and moral as well as physical courage. His motives and principles are of the world worldly, but he will readily do battle even with that world on occasion. He has served with distinction, of which he is naturally proud, and has fought his way through one or two scrapes by sheer coolness and pluck better than he deserved. He likes Gilbert more than most people, and hustles him about, and wakes him up, as he calls it, and otherwise domineers over him, as is his lordship's wont with his friends. Like all men of action, he finds a charm in an easy-going, good-natured, dreamy temperament, especially antagonistic to his own; so there are few days of which he does not spend a portion in Orme's society. Lord Holyhead is a widower, and, it would appear, not likely to marry again.

He soon fidgets out of his arm-chair, and makes a tour of the apartment, criticising for the hundredth time Gilbert's favourite prints and water-colours, and finding fault, as usual, with all the arrangements of his indolent friend on the sofa.

"You should put that screen farther back, Gilbert. It would show the caricatures better, and keep off the draught from the door. And do turn the Thetis with her face and neck to the light; you lose the whole effect of her attitude in that corner."

"I'm very fond of my Thetis," says Gilbert, with a stretch and a yawn.

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"No reason you should keep her in the dark, my boy. Then I don't like the bracket you have put her upon; all that florid carving is wretched bad taste, and not over-well done. I'll send you one I saw yesterday in Wardour Street, on condition that you'll turn this hideous landscape to the wall. The water runs uphill, and a thing like that has no business over a chimney-piece. Then Rosa Bonheur's print ought to hang as a *pendant* to the Landseer. By the way, talking of that, when are your horses coming up at Tattersall's?"

"To-day," answered Gilbert, settling himself into a more comfortable attitude on his couch.

"And you never told me a word about it. How like you. You certainly are the most indolent fellow in London. I wanted particularly to know, and I could have helped you to sell them. Why, Craner would give anything to have the little bay horse. Is he to be sold?"

"What, Matador?" replied the fortunate proprietor of that desirable animal, "yes—I suppose so—he'll go up with the rest."

"I mean the horse you rode over six feet of timber last season under the Coplow," urged Holyhead, warming with the congenial subject, as hunting men will.

"Only five," answered Gilbert quietly, but his eye kindled, and he moved into a sitting posture with something like reviving energy. Bellerophon was not a better horseman, and he was over-fond of that fascinating pursuit termed riding to hounds. Hitherto it had been his one excitement, his passion, his predilection, the poetry of his life.

On his mental vision came back, as in a picture, the dash and scurry of the scene; the stretching pastures smiling in the sun; the time-honoured Coplow, crested with trees, above him; the flashing scarlets scattering like a broken string of beads; Matador's sweeping gallop, and the meaning shake of his resolute little head; the oak rails, high, stiff, and ragged, with the gurgling watercourse beyond; and the deerlike bound that landed him alongside those white hounds fleeing so noiselessly up the hedgerow! Even in Green Street, his blood danced in his veins to think of it; but the *nil admirari* is the ruling principle of modern youth, and so he sat still and said nothing more.

"Five or six," resumed his friend, "you pounded them all, and quite right, too! Well, I shall be at Tattersall's after luncheon, and I'll write a note to Craner to meet me there. I suppose *you* won't take any trouble, and don't care a brass

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farthing whether the horses are sold, or boiled, or cut up into sandwiches?"

"It won't make much difference to me," answered Gilbert, who had never felt so little interest in these the most valued of his possessions as to-day; "we can't hunt again till November, you know, and now it's only May. If they're not sold, they'll go down to West Acres, and if they are, I can always buy some more."

"West Acres," said Lord Holyhead thoughtfully, "West Acres! why don't you marry your cousin, and go and live at West Acres?"

"She never asked me," remarked Gilbert, with considerable *naïveté*; but the colour rose a little to his brow, nevertheless, and he threw the end of his cigar into the grate, and unconsciously began to whistle the air that had lately taken such strange possession of his fancy.

Lord Holyhead was very much attached to his friend. He would have liked to furnish his house for him, buy his wines, choose his horses; nay, to provide him with such a wife as he thought good for him, draw up the settlements himself, and stand godfather to the firstborn, because this was his mode of showing his affection. He now began to ponder as to whether he should insist on Gilbert's becoming a Benedict or not.

"You're not a marrying man, I'm afraid," continued the peer, walking about the room, and flicking the furniture in general with his riding-whip; "for the matter of that, no more am I. Still, there's a good deal to be said upon the propriety of your settling at West Acres. In the first place, that property might be increased, with a little attention, nearly a third in value. Then your political interest should be kept up, and nothing does that so effectually as going to magistrates' meetings, and giving your neighbours venison and champagne. The fact is, you ought to be in Parliament, my boy. There will be a general election before long. Go down and stand for the county!"

"I don't seem to care much about Parliament," answered Gilbert; "and then the canvassing, and hand-shaking, and beer-drinking, are not exactly in my line. I don't see why I'm to be hand-and-glove with Brown, Jones, and Robinson, only when I want their votes, and I'm sure I couldn't keep it up when the necessity was past. Then think of those uncomfortable seats in the House of Commons, Holyhead; I'd rather be in a hussar-saddle, or a stall in a cathedral, or the front row of the dress circle at the play.

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No; I don't think it would suit my book to be a statesman."

"Nonsense!" replied his energetic adviser; "every fellow should have something to do. You'll be a paralytic by the time you're forty, if I can't wake you up into exertion. I'll tell you what, Gilbert—I'll let you off the House of Commons, if you'll promise me that you'll marry Lady Gertrude."

Again a faint colour rose to the listener's temples, and a slight movement escaped him of impatience and disgust. The same topic had often before been suggested, nay, urged upon him by his friend, and he had almost brought himself to look upon it as most of us do upon death—to regard it as an eventual catastrophe, of which the time and manner were both so uncertain, that it was useless to trouble his head upon the subject. Holyhead waxed more and more energetic as he proceeded—

"I don't know where you're to find a nicer girl, if you hunt all London for her—clever, accomplished, good-humoured, good-looking, and as thoroughbred as Eclipse. She's just the girl to make a good wife to a man in a certain position,"—and the peer thought of the late Lady Holyhead, who possessed indeed none of the advantages he enumerated; "then she gets on so well with your mother, and you know as well as I do it isn't everybody who can manage Lady Olivia. Hang it, Gilbert! if I was that sort of a fellow, you know, and soft, and so on, I'll be shot if I wouldn't marry her myself, if I thought she'd have me."

"I'm sure you have my leave to try," was the imperturbable answer. "Gertrude would like to be a peeress, and you're not such a bad fellow, after all; far more fit to be a respectable man than myself!"

The peer rose, looked in the glass, twirled his moustaches, and turned away with a doubtful shake of the head. Apparently the last suggestion had struck out a fresh train of ideas, for he consulted his watch, strode to the window to see if his horses were still at the door, and coming back to the sofa, bade its occupant good-bye, with a strenuous injunction not to be late.

"Of course not," replied Gilbert, looking up most innocently. "On no account—but why? and for what?"

"You'd make a saint swear," burst out Lord Holyhead. "Don't you remember you're engaged to dine at Richmond with me to-day? and I've arranged to drive you down. You promised, I'll take my oath, and if you've made any other engagement you must throw it over. Not a moment

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later than five, mind. You and I can go in the phaeton. I want to know what you think of my American horse. Charley Wing and old Landless will meet us at the Castle, and Madame Bravoura drives down with her aunt in my brougham. So that's the party—now, you won't put us in the hole."

"Bravoura's going, is she?" observed Gilbert; "I thought that was all over—'gone with the last year's snow.' How confiding of you to ask me to meet her! I say, Nobs, shall I go down in the brougham, and you can drive the aunt? Then you don't want to marry Gertrude quite yet, after all?"

Nobs, as his friend called him, vouchsafed no answer. "I'll call for you at White's," was all he said; and in another minute he was clattering up the street at his usual pace, which wore him out at least one hack a season, to the disgust of his groom, and the advantage of the dealers.

Ere he had turned the corner of the street, Gilbert rose from the sofa, and began to pace thoughtfully up and down the room. What had come over him? was he going to be ill? going to have a brain fever? or the measles for the second time, or what? Perhaps, after all, he was only growing old. Growing old! and on the sunny side of thirty—it could scarcely be that. Yet why had everything begun to pall upon him, that used to be so pleasant and enlivening? A year ago, nay, a fortnight ago, he would have willingly gone a dozen miles to meet Madame Bravoura. She was then a sparkling and fascinating syren, whose witty rejoinders were only made more enchanting by her broken English, and her mellifluous tones. Now she seemed to be nothing but a bold, bad Italian woman, with a sallow skin, a meretricious manner, and a hideous old aunt. Where 'on earth was the pleasure of associating with that sort of people? They had no ideas in common with himself, after all. What was their conversation but a tissue of slang, slander, and bad jokes? What were they without their tinsel, without sunshine, and pink bonnets, and sweet champagne, and clever men besides, to draw them out? Duller than the dullest of evangelical aunts or country cousins. He saw no merit in them—none whatever. He wondered at Holyhead! He had never wondered at Holyhead before.

Gilbert sat down again, and began to analyse his own feelings.

Now this is a process seldom productive of much good, unless a man has trained himself to reduce all his thoughts, wishes, and aspirations to the strictest standard of morality

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and high principle. For such an one, self-examination is doubtless the most invigorating and beneficial of all mental exercises; but if the inquiry be only conducted with a reference to *self*, if the *γνωθι σεαυτον* be but an injunction to learn what you yourself would most like, be but a recapitulation of your wishes, not your duties, a wail for your sufferings, not your sins, the mind becomes bewildered in the labyrinth from which it has no compass wherewith to extricate itself—becomes confused with the many courses which expediency can always point out in contradistinction to that one rugged way which is the path of right. And at last, like the scorpion “girt with fire,” hopeless of release, maddened by the impassable barrier that seems to hem it in on every side, turns and plunges its sting deeper and deeper into itself.

Gilbert Orme had never in his life reflected on the duties that he owed to the station in which he was placed, to his fellow-creatures, to his family, nay, even to himself. It had never occurred to him that a reasonable being was scarcely put into this world for no higher purpose than to wear out a certain quantity of clothes, eat a certain number of dinners, and make himself tolerably agreeable to a certain circle of people, whose bodies were as well cared for as his own. He had sometimes found himself restless, he didn't know why; and very often bored and languid without sufficient cause; but he heard others, with whom he associated, complain of the same symptoms, and he was quite satisfied to lay the blame on a loaded bottle of claret, or an east wind. He knew so many Clara Vere de Veres

“With joyous health, in boundless wealth,
Yet sickening of a vague disease.”

And one and all seemed to apply the same remedy—fresh excitement to prove a fresh opiate, and breed fresh disgust. Hitherto the treatment had answered moderately well. To-day he felt strangely out of sorts, and dissatisfied with the monotonous routine, to which he felt as if he were condemned by his own election and freewill. He did what any of his associates would have done in the same predicament—dressed with the utmost care, in a selection of Poole's noblest efforts, and wandered out into the streets with no very definite object, save to kill the afternoon.

It was strange how that singer in mourning haunted him; how the simple pathetic air she had sung so feelingly rang in his ears still; how that sweet pale face, framed in its soft brown hair, rose at every turn on his mental vision; how dis-

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tinctly he had caught the name, though only mentioned once, and then so carelessly, by John Gordon—Mrs. Latimer—Mrs. Latimer—and John knew something about her. Should he go and find John Gordon, who was safe to be immersed in his daily business till five? and then, what then? *cui bono*? Surely my boy was becoming what the fashionable novelists call *blasé*. From Dan to Beersheba, from the top of Grosvenor Place to Temple Bar, he had scanned it inch by inch, and it was all barren.

Now, if Gilbert had chartered a hansom cab, and paid the driver by the mile, I doubt if the latter would have taken the shady side of South Audley Street as his shortest route from the house occupied by his fare to the door of White's Club. Such, however, was the line my indolent friend chose to adopt, and it appeared simply from the force of habit that he turned up a street leading from that thoroughfare to the Park, to knock dreamily at the door of one of the prettiest houses in London—a house which always looked as if it had been freshly done up, and the balconies of which bloomed with such geraniums as were not to be seen elsewhere.

“Is Mrs. Montpellier at home?” asked Gilbert in a very matter-of-course voice; and the footman answered in corresponding tones, that Mrs. Montpellier was at luncheon, and “would Mr. Orme step this way?”

Now, Mrs. Montpellier was one of those ladies on whom their own sex choose to look somewhat askance without any defined cause. There were certain houses to which she was asked, certain people with whom she interchanged the card-leaving and other dreary courtesies of society; but those who repudiated her averred that the houses were what they called “*omnium gatherums*,” and the people second-rate. The accusation was scarcely a fair one, but it swamped Mrs. Montpellier's barque, nevertheless.

“Who is she?” demanded Lady Visigoth, with annually increasing virulence, spreading her long hands and tossing her head like one of her own carriage-horses; indeed, her face strongly resembled that of the Roman-nosed one that went on the near side. “There are stories about her, I tell you. What are her antecedents? answer me that!”

There were no stories about Lady Visigoth, nor when you looked at her were you surprised at her immunity; but when she asked you about Mrs. Montpellier's antecedents, in that voice of rigorous virtue, you could not but feel as if you yourself were doomed, however unjustly, to share the burden of the fair backslider's possible sins.

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Mrs. Montpellier's antecedents, however, albeit unknown to Lady Visigoth, were sufficiently romantic. She had made a runaway match with an Indian officer at nineteen, and had followed his fortunes through many a picturesque scene of danger and excitement. She had been under fire, too, real honest fighting fire, more than once; had seen a round-shot go through her tent and smash her workbox; on another occasion, the camel she rode in a somewhat ill-organised retreat had received a bullet-wound in its neck. She was rather proud of these adventures, and of the Rajahs whom she had visited, and the Begums in whose Eastern boudoirs she had made herself at home; and sometimes (not often) she would chat pleasantly of those days with a dash of quiet sarcasm and a vein of womanly sentiment that were not unpleasing. The young husband soon died, from climate and brandy-pawnee combined, and ere she could find her way home to her surviving relatives, *vid* Calcutta, she was snapped up in that city of palaces and induced to change her name once more, by Montpellier, of the civil service, a tall, thin, yellow man, like a bamboo, old enough to be her father, and rich enough to have paved the street he lived in with gold. She never spoke of that time; and whereas there were miniatures, and photographs, and remembrances of her first husband scattered about her drawing-room in profusion, any *souvenirs* she had of old Montpellier were locked away carefully upstairs in her writing-desk. I believe she loved "the bamboo" very dearly. Reserved as he was with others, he doted on his handsome wife, and she—old, withered, ugly as he was—why did she love him? I can give no better reason than a woman's answer—because she did!

He left her, for the second time, a widow, in the prime of life—very rich, very good-looking, and, after a year or two, tolerably resigned to her fate. She wandered about the Continent for a time, and refused, of course, many an offer of marriage. Indeed, Mrs. Montpellier was a lady who could take very good care of herself. Finally, notwithstanding her deficiency in antecedents, she came and settled in London, three doors from Lady Visigoth. I should despair of explaining to male stupidity how it was possible that, after a career of adventure and travel; after the glowing Indian days, first of thrilling excitement, then of princely magnificence; after the gorgeous colouring and the dazzling climate, and the ease and freedom of Hindostan, Mrs. Montpellier could settle down to a quiet street in Mayfair, and find absorbing interest in the narrow routine of London life. A lady will understand it in

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a minute. She puts herself at once in Mrs. Montpellier's place. Give her a household to order, a few shops to go to, a certain position to wrest or to retain, above all, a feud with Lady Visigoth, and she will have no difficulty in finding occupation for every hour in the twenty-four.

The widow (perhaps a twice-bereaved one may fairly be called a widow *indeed*)—the widow had seen a good deal of life, and had not failed to profit by what she saw. Rather repudiating the idea of a third sacrifice, she had resolved to enjoy, to the utmost, the many pleasures and amusements which her situation permitted; and setting Lady Visigoth at defiance, she made her house the pleasantest lounge in London, and, consequently, commanded a great deal of very agreeable society, of which that exclusive dame could not have the faintest notion. Mrs. Montpellier's little suppers on Saturday nights; Mrs. Montpellier's luncheons—her dinners—her choice picnics—her well-selected parties—all went off without hitch or *contretemps*. If you were dying to meet "somebody," and dined with Mrs. Montpellier, you were sure to go down to dinner with that somebody and no other on your arm. If you wondered what had become of your old chum whom you had never seen since he pulled next you in the ten-oar at Eton, or went up the breach alongside of you at Sobraon, ten to one you found him at luncheon at Mrs. Montpellier's. If you wanted a fourth in that barouche which was going anywhere out of town, who must amuse and interest the other three all the way there and back again, you had but to draw Mrs. Montpellier's pretty house between two and five, and you might select your companion from the pleasantest people in London. No wonder the young men dropped in so naturally at Mrs. Montpellier's, and stayed there, as Lady Visigoth viciously remarked, so long!

The hostess herself was, to do her justice, no slight attraction. Though a good deal past thirty—indeed as far past as she well could be—she was bright and handsome still. Very dark, her complexion had deepened rather than faded under an Indian sun, and her black hair was, as yet, unstreaked with a line of grey. Her features, though irregular, had extraordinary play and brilliancy. She dressed, too, to perfection, and was never to be surprised in unbecoming colours or costume; while her figure, which had always been her strong point (and a very strong point such a figure is), preserved its symmetrical outline, and remained lithe and undulating as in the days of her first honeymoon. Altogether, people were justified in their general expression of wonder why Mrs.

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Montpellier didn't marry again—a question Lady Visigoth delighted to answer with a shrug of her broad bony shoulders, and in a tone of mysterious defiance truly intimidating.

“There *may* be fifty reasons—goodness only knows!” Doctor Johnson loved a good hater; the quality to less vigorous minds is perhaps suggestive of awe rather than affection. I admire its wondrous development, on occasion, in the female breast. For the converse of that charity which the apostle enjoins—that pure white mantle which can cover all the scarlet stains of sin, ay, and wrap a shivering wounded neighbour too in its kindly folds—for the self-righteousness that puffeth up and vaunteth its own merits, that thinketh evil, that suffereth not long, and is easily provoked—for a thoroughgoing and practical opposition to the true fundamental precepts of Christianity, commend me to the merciless rancour of a virtuous British matron such as my Lady Visigoth.

Gilbert was a prime favourite with his hostess. Indeed he was very generally popular amongst women, from the damsel in her teens, just out, who voted him very good-natured, and was “not the least afraid” of him, to the *passée* woman of the world, who found something interesting and unusual in a certain freshness of sentiment and originality of thought which he never entirely lost, and to whom his little affectations of indolence and *sans-souci* were amusing, because so utterly transparent. He would laugh *at* himself, too, and *with* them, in the most perfect good-humour. He was not to be put out by any disappointment, and never seemed to care enough about anything to make him cross. Then he was not the least given to making love to them; and let satirists say what they will about the craving for conquest implanted in the gentler sex, they do like a man, who will at once put them on an equal intellectual footing with himself, and who offers them frank confidence and respect rather than admiration which they suspect to be false, and flattery so sweet as to become unpalatable.

Mrs. Montpellier shook him by both hands, and bade him sit down and eat.

“I thought you were never coming to see me again, Mr. Orme,” said the hospitable lady; “and it's no use asking you to dinner, for you're always engaged. Now, what will you have? Everything's cold. This is the first day I've lunched alone for six weeks. What have you been doing all these ages? Now do tell me all about yourself.”

This last request, I may observe in a parenthesis, is essen-

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tially feminine. To me, as propounded by a gentle refined being, it always appears a complete stagerer. Would they really like to know? and how could the best and wisest of us tell them?

"Oh," answered Gilbert, "that is easily done. My time is chiefly employed in learning to work cross-stitch backwards, winding silks for my cousin, and reading good books to my mother."

She held up her pretty finger at him, as one would threaten a child.

"No, nonsense," said Mrs. Montpellier. "I hear all sorts of stories about you. Come, out with it; make a clean breast of it, and begin."

"Virtue is always liable to scandal," replied he, laughing. "With the exception of the pursuits I have named, I have been fulfilling my daily duties, and earning the reward of a good conscience. With Holyhead to help me, I have been much employed in doing nothing; have done it rather well, and a good deal of it."

"Are you going down to Richmond with Lord Holyhead to-day?" asked the lady, looking sharply and meaningly in his face. "I hope not. I don't approve of your friend. I don't approve of your party. You see I know everything."

"Of course you do. You sat next him at dinner yesterday at the St. Quentins'. You had on the yellow dress—the one with black lace; not the pale one with roses. It was stupid of that servant to upset a cream over it. Woe is me! I shall never see that yellow gown again."

"How do you know all this?"

"Never mind. I was sure Holyhead had seen you, because he was so restless and uncomfortable this morning. He has moved every article of furniture in my room, and broken two vases and a small china teapot; but he didn't dare mention your name. A little bird told me about the cream."

The widow laughed, but she did not blush. Lord Holyhead's impenetrable nature was so well known, that it was a standing joke to quiz her on having subjugated him—a joke she herself took in exceedingly good part.

"I believe you were there yourself, Mr. Orme," said she, rising to adjourn to the drawing-room. "I believe you were the footman that did it, and had disguised yourself for the purpose, as the gallants about the French Court used to do in Louis Quatorze's time. Fancy being forbid to speak to a man on peril of your life, and his marching up to you with the teatray, or bringing you the vegetables at dinner. Ah,

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those *were* days. People never do such things now. There are no devoted lovers in the nineteenth century."

"Don't be too sure of that, Mrs. Montpellier. Why did Holyhead stay so late, except to put you into your carriage? You see I know that too."

"You are too absurd. Talking of carriages, will you drive down with me to-day to Kew Gardens? Much better for you than that odious Richmond party. The Ringdoves are coming. They both like you so much; and I must have a fourth, for they are still so taken up with each other. I wonder if it will last. We'll hear the band play, and drive back again to a quiet dinner here; then we shall be all quite fresh for Lady Clearwell's. By the bye, did you go to the morning concert yesterday? I hear it was rather good. Tell me all about it."

Gilbert was intensely provoked. Do what he would, the colour rose to his face as if he had been a schoolboy. Though he shifted his position and got into another chair, he did not do it well, and he felt that Mrs. Montpellier could not but remark his confusion. Luckily, just then, other visitors were announced, and he took his leave, but not till she had shot another of those sharp inquiring glances of hers point-blank at him. When he got into the street he remembered that he had never replied to her good-natured offer of a seat in her carriage. He who was generally so composed and indolent and imperturbable—what had come over him?

"There's something very queer about me to-day," thought Gilbert, as he turned once more into South Audley Street. "If I didn't believe it's impossible, I should think I was getting nervous. This sort of thing won't do at all. Hang it, I'll jump into a hansom, and go and see John Gordon!"

CHAPTER IX

JOHN GORDON



HERE are some men who seem to be consulted instinctively by everyone in a difficulty. Which of us but has a friend somewhere to whom he flies at a moment's notice when he finds himself in a dilemma, whose opinions he asks eagerly, to whose maxims he listens with respectful deference, for whose brotherly interest he certainly feels intensely grateful, and by whose advice he as certainly refuses to abide?

I have heard experienced counsel affirm, that the great difficulty they have to contend with in the defence of criminal cases, is the extreme unwillingness on the part of the prisoner to confess, even to his adviser, "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." There is a *suppressio veri* somewhere in the unbosoming of even the most candid of culprits, and on this unfortified point the whole defence is apt to break down. "I could have got him off, if I'd been quite sure he did it," says the astute Balthazar; "but if a man won't trust his counsel, he deserves to lose, and be hanged to him!"—which is perhaps, after all, the result of his ill-advised insincerity.

Now, on a point in which his own personal feelings were not concerned (for on those in which they are, I hold no man to be better than a fool), I would have taken John Gordon's opinion as I would the Lord Chancellor's. He was one of the few men I have ever known who could calculate the eventual, not the immediate, results of any given measure. I can find hundreds who will demonstrate clearly that if I pull the trigger the piece will go off; but I could number on my fingers those whose far-sightedness can hazard an opinion as

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to whether the cartridge will reach the pigeon at which it is aimed, or fall short on the breast of the inglorious crow. John Gordon, like a fine rider across a country, could see his way, so to speak, into the far distance, field by field. It would have been a *very* queer obstacle that turned him from it when once he had taken his line.

His whole career had hitherto been one of uncompromising determination. He was well-born—indeed, a distant connection of Lady Olivia's,—well-bred, and well-educated; *but* he was a second son. These encumbrances may think themselves fortunate in succeeding to a portion at all, more fortunate still if it is ever paid up. John Gordon's brother had five thousand a year—John Gordon himself had five thousand pounds. He inherited, though, from his mother, a legacy worth five times that amount—an iron constitution, which nothing seemed able to impair, and a strength of will rarely equalled, at least in his own sex. An offshoot from the illustrious stock to which Lady Olivia belonged, the late Mrs. Gordon possessed, in common with her family, a noble obstinacy, which, while it degenerated in the male scions into pig-headedness and stupidity, fortified the females into rulers of absolute and irresponsible authority. This quality had descended to her son, modified, as became his sex, into a milder form; and to an unswerving determination in that course which his reason told him was the most judicious, John owed all the success he ever had in life.

Most young men of the upper class with five thousand pounds, seem to think so inadequate a provision is hardly worth taking care of, and fritter the principal away in the pursuit of pleasure, with a touching resignation and an implicit reliance on Destiny which would do credit to a Moslem. Some more adventurous spirits sink their capital in the purchase of commissions in the army—a glorious profession doubtless, but not lucrative. Bellona's noblest prizes will make their winner illustrious certainly, but not independent; and a clean-swept orderly-room is a poor substitute to a middle-aged man for the happiness of a home. To be sure, there is the off-chance of a settlement by a violent death, but this can scarcely be placed to the credit-side of the account. Few think of making the five thousand into ten thousand; but of these few was John Gordon. At eighteen he thought the matter over in this wise:—"What would I wish to be at forty? Certainly at that age one begins to get an old fellow; but I doubt if even then one is quite past all the pleasures of life. I see men at forty as active, as full of energy, as hope-

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ful, as enthusiastic, almost as great fools, as at twenty. I am not sure but that they enjoy the world more than their juniors. Their place is marked out, their position established and allowed; they can still look forward, and perhaps it is pleasant also to look back." (John had seen but little from the latter point of view, and knew as yet nothing of "a sorrow's crown of sorrow.") "Yes, it is not such a worn-out age after all. What would I like to be at forty? I should like to be independent, to have influence, a certain station, and recognised position in society. Perhaps I might wish to marry; certainly, I should want a home. How are these things to be obtained? I want them, therefore I *will* have them. I have youth, I feel; I have energy and endurance, I know. I have never been beat yet in the cricket-ground or the schoolroom; why should I not conquer in the real world outside? Had I lived in the dark ages, I should have taken care to have a good horse under me, a good sword by my side—as many men-at-arms as I could command at my back. In those days such were the accessories which wrested power and independence, and the enjoyments of life. What constitutes power now? What is the talisman that obtains for a man respect, regard, friendship, applause, and admiration? Is it genius?—no; courage?—no; benevolence and philanthropy?—no. I have already seen men with each and all of these qualities go irremediably to the wall. What is it, then?—money! Am I satisfied of this?—thoroughly. Money, then, I want, and money I will have. How am I to get it? I have two-and-twenty years before me, and five thousand down the day I come of age. I will go into business at once. What have I to do with aristocratic prejudices? and what need I care for the sneers of my smart friends? Will the blood they talk about so much as provide me with a fine coat, as it does a thoroughbred horse. Of what use is an escutcheon without a hall to hang it up in? I will go into business to-morrow. If I live to see my fortieth birthday, it shall not be my fault if I am in a worse position than my elder brother!"

Few lads of eighteen would have argued thus. I do not like John Gordon the better that at his age he could so clearly see his own way to his own interest; but I am not painting people as I should wish them to be, but simply as they are. The young calculator was right enough in theory—merely wrong in a matter of detail. "The children of darkness," we know, are "wise in their generation;" and we cannot blame the man who resolves to obtain that which he has made up his mind he requires. The plan only wanted enlarging; the

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schemer did not go far enough. Had he doubled the fixed period, substituting eighty for forty, and set his heart on a safer investment, in a certain bank which returns millions per cent., and into which thieves cannot break through and steal, he would, indeed, have proved himself the most prudent and successful of speculators.

Into business accordingly John Gordon went—beginning at the beginning, on a high office-chair, and mastering detail after detail, and intricacy after intricacy, with the dogged resolution so peculiarly his own. When a man shows himself determined to take his line, irrespective of the opinions of others, it is wonderful how little his friends interfere with him, how soon they begin to coincide with his views, and vote that they had agreed with him all along. There is nothing so easy as to lead a crowd; but then you must not be a part of the crowd yourself, or shrink one iota from going first. A moment's hesitation is fatal; but dash in resolutely, and though it be the pit of Acheron, never doubt but that it will be full directly.

John Gordon found himself quite as welcome in the great world, quite as efficient a stop-gap at my lord's dinner-table or my lady's ball, as if he had been the idlest of the drones, consuming his five thousand as he wanted it month by month. What mattered it to old Landless, who had been keeping his empty head above water with the greatest difficulty for the last forty years, that the pleasant listener who sat next him had spent his morning digging the root of all evil east of Temple Bar? Miss Troller only wanted a partner to enable her to dance *vis-à-vis* to Lord Grayling. Mr. Gordon's figure was gentlemanlike, his boots irreproachable. It made no difference whatever to that far-seeing young lady whether he kept a ledger or a betting-book; and, doubtless, her ideas as to the real nature of each were equally confused. Through his connections, he possessed the *entrée* into a certain number of great men's houses—a privilege obtained on the easiest terms by some, and difficult as paradise to win by others; and he took advantage of his position, and frequented their solemnities, called by courtesy entertainments, with sufficient moderation. John Gordon was a satirist *jusqu'au bout des ongles*; albeit a satirist who could see good as well as evil, and a little to create a smile amongst much which could but call up a sneer. So it amused him to go into this world of gaiety as well as that of business, in which he spent his working life; to watch the anxieties, and overreachings, and rankling grudges, and general selfishness of those petty

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gamblers, playing as eagerly for their counters as the others did for gold. Moreover, he did not frequent Vanity Fair entirely without an object. Few men, I fancy, do. John Gordon's heart was *robur et æs triplex*, sound and whole, and riveted, so to speak, with plates of steel; yet it had its predilections, nevertheless. Of all his partners, the one he preferred to dance with, the one with whom he lingered longest through those precious "cooling" minutes of which tearooms, staircases, and conservatories witness the too rapid flight, was Lady Gertrude. He was not one of those men who can go home and dream of soft eyes, and floating hair, and burning whispers, and flowers and gloves, and the bewitching absurdity of the whole process. He had no leisure for such nonsense, and didn't mean to have for years to come. But if you had asked him who was the nicest girl in London, the best-dressed, the best-looking, the best dancer, the cleverest and the most agreeable, he would have answered, "Lady Gertrude."

As for dreaming of her, pshaw! He went to bed to sleep, not to dream. A plateful of lobster-salad, consumed with a good appetite, a couple of glasses of champagne, a cigar in the cool summer morning, and a huge tumbler of cold water before going to bed—such was the conclusion of one of his nights of relaxation; and as he had to be in the counting-house next morning by ten at the latest, there was little enough time for sleeping, let alone dreams.

Lady Olivia was a great stickler for kith and kin. It is one of the kindest prejudices of the aristocracy, and, to their credit be it said, it is a distinguishing feature of their class. Her ladyship was an accurate genealogist; and she never could forget that the late Mrs. Gordon, of obdurate memory, and her own mother were first cousins, nor how they had each danced on the same evening with the royalty of their day—an exploit on which she looked much in the same light as a man would on the fact of two of his line having charged stirrup to stirrup at Poitiers. Therefore, John Gordon came to luncheon whenever he liked in Belgrave Square; therefore, she consulted him about her investments, her lease, her carriage-horses, and such matters as dowagers find it expedient to discuss with a male adviser—till at length it was obvious to the whole household that the only person to whom my lady would listen, or who could influence her the least, was Mr. Gordon.

Did the younger lady also hearken with pleasure to Mr. Gordon's short commanding tones, and suffer her own ideas,

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and her own liking and disliking, to be influenced by that gentleman's opinions, delivered, it must be confessed, with more energy than politeness? She did not think so herself. She repudiated all allegiance to his tenets. She generally disagreed with him, but she always listened attentively to what he had to say.

Such was the gentleman who, with cuffs turned up and strong sinewy wrists displayed, was now washing his hands in a dark little room off Alderman Jones' counting-house, preparatory to taking his leave of business for the day. He had done his work, earned his wages, and was now ready and willing for a few hours of that gay world which could still amuse even if it failed to interest him. He is already the junior partner in the firm of Jones and Gordon, a firm which City-men know to be doing such good business. The alderman can trust him implicitly: "A partner who can play his own hand and mine too, sir," says that worthy, when discussing his junior's merits; and the five thousand is rolling up and accumulating rapidly. Alas! that his heart is hardening in proportion, and his wishes learning to centre more and more upon pounds, shillings, and pence. Alas! that even at this moment his thoughts are still intent on to-day's consignment; and the subjects that are perhaps the farthest from his mind are Lady Olivia, Lady Gertrude, and Gilbert Orme.

Gilbert has lounged through the counting-house with his usual graceful languor, exchanging the news of the day with a hardworking clerk, in just such a tone of cordiality as he would use to a peer at his club. The clerk thinks him the most "affable" of swells, and wishes in his heart that his own boots and coat would only fit him like those, resolving also, that on the first opportunity he will try if he cannot imitate the gait and general manner of his new acquaintance. Pending John Gordon's ablutions, he has imparted to him one or two secrets of the trade which Gilbert does not the least understand, and asked his opinion of a racehorse that the latter knows to have broken down. Gilbert replies with the utmost *naïveté* and good faith, but he is a little absent and preoccupied, though he pretends to take an interest in the clerk's turf speculations; and the idea uppermost in his mind is, "What a bore it must be for John Gordon to spend all his mornings in an uncomfortable room like this without a carpet!"

"Well, Gilbert, how are you? What has brought you here?" says John, emerging from his retreat with his cuffs still turned up, and offering his visitor a hand scarcely yet dry.

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The same question occurs at the same moment to Gilbert for the first time; he does not the least know what brought him here, and he says so. John laughs a short sarcastic laugh, that seems to shake some imaginary folly to bits as a terrier would a rat.

"Then it's the greater compliment," he observes. "You must have come on purpose to pay me a visit. Now, what can I do for you? Do you want to learn bookkeeping? Shall I give you some luncheon? Here are the tools for the one; the other can be got in five minutes from a pothouse over the way."

"Do you mean to say you *eat* here," asks Gilbert, with a sort of quiet astonishment, "and smoke, and all that sort of thing, as one would at home?"

The drone, you see, looks upon this undesirable hive as a place in which to make, but not to consume, the honey.

"Of course," answers the junior partner. "Why, in busy times I often sleep here. I say, Gilbert, have you ever been in an omnibus? I'm going to Pall Mall. Come with me. We can go the whole way for threepence!"

Gilbert laughed, and owned he never had, but would like it of all things.

"I have a hansom waiting at the door, though," he said; "better jump in and come back with me. The fact is, I had nothing particular to do. I thought the drive would do me good, and I could bring you back with me; so here I am."

Now, a scheme was gradually unfolding itself in Gilbert's mind. By seducing his friend into a cab, and artfully leading the conversation towards the subject next his heart, he thought he might perhaps find out something about the individual who for the last few hours had occupied so large a portion of his attention. John had said yesterday he knew something about Mrs. Latimer; what did he know? He was a bad hand at pumping; but still he would surely get that something out of him before they reached Pall Mall. Strange that he should not have asked him point-blank whatever he wanted to ascertain! A child, when frightened, buries its little face in mamma's lap: the natural impulse of a grown-up man is to shut his eyes, and shrink away from a missile flying towards his head. And so in moral as well as physical danger the instinct of weak humanity is to avoid rather than confront the attack. We suffer the enemy to take us in flank or rear, and then wonder that our resistance is so feeble, and so quickly overcome.

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Gilbert's plans of strategy, however, were on this occasion fated to remain undeveloped. Chance every now and then gives us mortals a lift when we least expect it, as though to vindicate her suzerainty over terrestrial affairs; and the fickle goddess had a sugarplum in store for Gilbert, as, followed by the junior partner, he emerged into the street.

CHAPTER X

BELLA JONES

A VERY pretty sociable was standing at the door of the counting-house, and a very pretty bouquet, fresh from the country, was lying in the front seat thereof. Fresher and more blooming than the paint on the sociable or the flowers in the bouquet, Miss Jones sat solitary in the carriage. Gilbert's hat was off in a moment, and the young lady shook hands with him, and blushed, and laughed, and wondered at meeting *him* there, and was glad to see him ; and seemed to have nothing more to say, and to be rather shy and ill at ease, and relieved to take refuge with John Gordon, whom she knew so well, and who belonged, as it were, to the establishment.

Whatever may have been her opinion of John Gordon, Bella entertained a profound admiration for Gilbert, whom she regarded as a superior being altogether removed from her own sphere. She had seen him prancing about in the Park, on the most familiar terms with personages whose names were matters of history, or threading his way on foot amongst the carriages of those despotic ladies of fashion who rule their own world so rigorously ; and she believed him in her heart to be a compound of Bayard and Beau Brummel. Notwithstanding her rosy cheeks and her loud laugh, Bella cherished a tendency to hero-worship. She revered Mr. Orme therefore, and was a little afraid of him, which was uncalled for, and coloured up whenever he spoke to her, which was uncomfortable. So she addressed herself to the junior partner—

“ I was to wait for papa here ; he has gone to the bank, and he said he shouldn't be long, and I thought we were late, for there was a grand stoppage, as usual, in Fleet Street ; and I brought you some flowers, Mr. Gordon, for the counting-house. It does look so dreary ; I can't tell you how I pity you on these fine spring days.”

“ Thank you, Miss Jones,” said John, taking the nosegay as

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if he had been a gardener; "thank you. They'll soon wither in there, and then you must bring me some more."

"Why don't you come and fetch them yourself?" asked the young lady. "You have not been near us for a week, and you don't know how beautiful the Villa looks now, and how the things have come out the last few days. You used always to dine with us on Sundays, and now you never do."

"Halloo, John!" interrupted Gilbert, "here's an accusation, a manifest charge against you. Give an account of yourself. Where do you go on Sundays? I assure you, Miss Jones, he does not spend them with me."

Miss Jones looked as if she were going to say, "So much the better for him;" but if such was her opinion, she sent it back from her lips, and answered demurely enough—

"We are so far out of London, I know it is a great tax upon people to ask them to come to us; but that is not papa's fault or mine. There we are; and Mr. Gordon knows he is always welcome."

"Welcome! Of course he is," said a hearty voice behind them; and the jolly alderman appeared at the door of the carriage, and smacked John Gordon on the back, and shook hands with Gilbert, and took off his hat, and mopped his bald head, returning his silk handkerchief, as his father had done before him, into the crown. Then turning abruptly to John, asked him—

"How about Surety and Safe?"

"Seventeen and nine in the pound," answered John.

"And the bales from Liverpool?"

"Got the invoice by to-day's post—second delivery."

"Then I needn't go in there," pursued the alderman, pointing over his shoulder towards his counting-house; "and indeed work ought to be over for to-day, and play-time to begin. I've done my business, John, and you've done your business; and as for Mr. Gilbert and my little girl there, they've no business here at all—so much the better for them. Got a handful of trumps apiece, and no thanks to anybody but the dealer. What say you, gentlemen? Will you jump into the sociable—drive off to the Villa—saddle of Welsh mutton—'34 claret, country air, and a rubber—wind up with a bit of supper, and just *one* of the old brandy—bottled before you were born, Mr. Gilbert? Dear, dear, how you boys keep growing up, to be sure!"

The alderman had been Gilbert's guardian. As a practical man of business, and not averse to trouble, he had of course been a working one; and it was hard to say whether he took

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a greater pride in his former ward, for whom he had a sincere affection, or in the fine fortune which he had nursed so long and tenderly, and the inroads into which he contemplated with the same kind of feeling with which you see a child trampling down and destroying the garden-beds you have raked, and planted, and watered, and put in order for him. It is the urchin's own, and therefore you do not interfere; but it *is* provoking, nevertheless. He called him Mr. Gilbert still, and considered him a very promising boy, though he was near thirty.

"You forget, papa," interposed his daughter, who in all such matters was the keeper of the alderman's memory, if not his conscience—"you forget we were engaged to dine with the Bullingdons. This is Blanche Bullingdon's birthday. You know they are coming to us on Thursday."

The latter sentence was whispered in her father's ear. I think Miss Bella rather intended it in the light of a suggestion. In good truth, such a star as Gilbert would be no slight acquisition to a suburban dinner-party; and then if John Gordon took her in to dinner, it would be a day to mark with white chalk, and her happiness would be complete. Bella had accustomed herself to depend rather too much on her staunch ally, the junior partner.

"The Bullingdons! My dear, so we are. Very stupid of me to forget, especially as I met Bullingdon this morning, and he bade me be sure and taste the old madeira—gave a guinea a bottle for it, and cheap at the money, as he tells me. Never mind; I think I can give you as good. Now, when will you come?"

The young men looked at each other as they thought over their engagements. Nothing is so perplexing as a general invitation; and, though we have each of us our private *memoria technica*, our harmless predilections, that, like the alderman's madeira at a guinea a bottle, remind us of our wishes or our duties, they are apt to fail us when called up at such short notice; and we cannot recollect in an instant whether we dine to-morrow with the Bullingdons, or Duke Humphrey, or elsewhere.

Bella was accustomed to the part of a hostess; she now interposed quietly and gracefully—

"If you have no better engagement, and could come to us on Thursday, we should be delighted. It is very short notice, I know; but we shall at least have somebody to meet you, and a little music—and you mustn't mind if it's very stupid," pleaded poor Bella, looking apologetically at Mr. Orme.

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Gilbert was already thinking how far he could get out of it. He had even gone so far as to murmur something about a "previous engagement," and an "opera-night," and "hoping some other time," when the alderman, whose hospitality was unbounded, caught him by the arm—

"Say you'll come, Mr. Gilbert. You've never dined with me yet since I got into the new house. I shall have some turtle, too, by Thursday—don't forget that, Bella—and you'll like Bullingdon. Not one of your dandies, but a rare judge of wine, and the best covert-shot in Hertfordshire. Mind you don't fall in love with Blanche, you dog. Eh, Bella? Then my girl's singing-mistress is to dine with us, and if you're fond of music—which I'm not—you'll have enough of it in the evening. She's an extraordinary woman that—plays as good a hand at whist as Major A——; and as for singing, people who are good judges say there isn't a voice in London to equal Mrs. Latimer's."

Mrs. Latimer's! Gilbert's heart gave such a jump against the cigar-case in his breast-pocket as almost broke a regalia. Then he needn't pump John Gordon and show himself up, after all. Here was the worthy alderman a rosy *deus ex machinâ*, entreating him as a favour to come and meet the very person he would willingly have hunted all over London to see. Dine with him? Of course he would dine with him. He remembered at that moment he was solemnly pledged for Thursday to his great-uncle the bishop, a prelate of rigorous opinions, who would never forgive him. What matter? Had it been St. Paul, he must have thrown him over. "He should be delighted," he said; and, indeed, he looked delighted. His eye sparkled, and the languid indolent manner seemed all at once to wake up into interest and life. The change could not but be remarked. John Gordon attributed it to Bella's *beaux yeux*, and wondered somewhat uncomfortably whether Gilbert admired her only because he had seen her so little, and she was so different from the young ladies to whom he was accustomed. The alderman opined it was his mention of turtle that produced this beneficial change; whilst Miss Jones was quite content to take things as they were, and congratulated herself on having secured such an effective addition to their dinner-party. She was satisfied, too, about John; for she knew his face so well as to see that he intended to come, at a glance. Altogether, Thursday's banquet promised to go off well; and as the sociable rattled away towards the Regent's Park, the two young men looked after it, with marked approval depicted on their respective countenances.

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"What a nice, unaffected, good-humoured girl that is!" said Gilbert, kicking back the half-doors of his hansom to let his companion in. "She's not exactly a beauty, but she's very fresh and pleasant-looking. She wouldn't make a fellow at all a bad wife, now, if he wanted that kind of thing. Do for *you*, John, only she isn't half swell enough."

Many a random shaft hits the white. John's ideal, if he had permitted his well-regulated mind to entertain such a tormentor, would indeed have been a lady of far different calibre from Bella Jones—would have been a haughty high-born damsel, clever, and scornful, and perhaps a little wayward; one who would have flouted him, and worried him, and given ample occasion for the exercise of that self-command of which he was so proud, all the pleasure of dear-bought victory in moulding her to his will. So he answered, frankly and unhesitatingly—

"The best little girl in England—worth her weight in gold, and she can't be less than ten stone. I don't know what the alderman would do without her."

Further conversation was rendered impossible by the incessant noise of a great city thoroughfare. The hansom, however, well-horsed and skilfully driven, kept its time. Lord Holyhead had not waited above four minutes, or cursed his friend's unpunctuality more than that number of times, ere Gilbert was seated by his side, and the American horse doing his best to step with his comrade, and elicit the Englishman's approval.

But in despite of fine weather and water-souchée, despite of "maids of honour" and sweet champagne, the Richmond dinner did not go off satisfactorily. Charley Wing's invincible spirits and radiant smiles enlivened the thing for a while, but it is hard for a single individual to find gaiety for five, and even Charley caught himself more than once suppressing a yawn and voting the matter dead slow in his heart of hearts. Landless ate and drank, as he always did, for a dozen, and varied but little indeed from his normal state of twaddling anecdote and comatose affability; but he had really told that story about George IV. and a "trifle from Brighton" so often that it was a bore, and when the claret was pushed round (and claret at these entertainments always *is* a failure), and he began to expatiate on his own losses and reverses in early life, there was no resource left but a general break-up to cigars and coffee.

Holyhead did his duty with the hospitality of an Arab, but his gaiety was evidently forced, and a cloud lowered on his

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brow, portending, to those who knew him well, the brewing of a storm, which, had he not been the giver of the feast, would have burst forth long ago. Gilbert was excessively silent, provokingly absent, and wished he hadn't come. Madame Bravoura's aunt, of whom nobody ever knew the name, was deaf, and to all appearance half-witted. She seldom opened her mouth except to take in stores, and was indeed remarkable for nothing but her infirmities, and an enormous cameo brooch, which was stuck into her person immediately below her double chin. Why madame persisted in taking this old lady everywhere, nobody exactly made out. There were all sorts of stories as to the relationship and reciprocal obligations between the pair, but none were founded on probability. My own opinion is that she was the signora's mother, and that the attention paid her by the latter was one of the few redeeming points in that reprehensible person's character, though why she did not openly avow the maternity I am at a loss to imagine.

Now, it is hard when the skeleton at the feast has come there by invitation—nay, harder still when the feast has been made on purpose for the skeleton. In the present instance, Madame Bravoura thought fit to enact the part of the unwelcome *convive*—not physically indeed, for madame's proportions were ample and her crinoline abundant; but in a moral, or, perhaps, I should rather say, in an æsthetic sense, she sat there in her bones. Something had occurred to put her out on her way down. As Charley Wing observed, she had an easy temper—easily aroused, and she determined to revenge herself on the whole party, and especially "Olli-ead," as she called him, by putting everything *à tort et à travers*. The surest method of doing this was obviously to make furious love to Gilbert Orme, and the signora, no inexperienced practitioner, addressed herself to the task with considerable skill and perseverance. There is nothing more amusing than to watch a gentleman undergoing this process at the hands of the fair. Charley Wing indeed, who was used to it, would have remained perfectly passive and imperturbable under any amount of such persecution; he considered it as one of the duties he owed to society, and went through it deliberately and with edifying gravity, but it was no use attacking *him*. Young Wing was a sort of privileged pet, supposed to be, as doubtless he was, perfectly harmless. The most careful shepherd would trust him implicitly with any or all of his lambs—the most rabid Othello send him home, and welcome, in the brougham with Desdemona. Bravoura might have sat

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on his knee and lit his cigar for him, without calling up a passing frown on Holyhead's brow. "He didn't so much mind Charley;" but Orme was a man of a different calibre altogether, and, under the circumstances, his lordship thought with justice, she need not have been so demonstrative.

Gilbert fought off as much as he could. Annoyed on Holyhead's account, and disgusted on his own, his answers became shorter, and his manner more distant, as the signora grew more affectionate. She scarcely spoke to any of the others; she drank wine with him at dinner, asked his opinion as to everything she was to eat, and finally lit her *cigarette* from his cigar, and puffed a volume of smoke in his face with her harsh laugh, as she vowed he was the only man in London the least *selon son goût*, and that he must come and see her in Italy, where she would go back as quick as ever she could, directly her odious engagement in horrid England was over. She flashed a glance of surpassing wrath at Holyhead as she spoke, who kept his temper admirably, though with an effort.

Charley Wing tried to make the conversation general, and old Landless edged in a request for a *very* small quantity of hot brandy-and-water; but the signora pushed the siege vigorously, and was not to be repulsed.

The brandy came, and with it the announcement that the carriages were at the door. Dipping a lump of sugar into a liqueur-glass of the spirit, Bravoura popped it into Gilbert's mouth.

"*Vous voyez que je suis femme galante moi!*" said the lady, in her most brazen tones, and, indeed, there was no occasion to proclaim the fact; "*et je vous dis que je vous trouve charmant,*" backing this unequivocal declaration by an offer of a lift back to London in "Olli-ead's" brougham, between herself and the deaf aunt.

Even Landless was startled.

"That's what they call at sea a stopper over all," said the old pleasure-seeker, finishing his tumbler at a gulp.

The gentleman excused himself on the plea that he must go back as he came down; "he wanted to smoke," he said, "and preferred an open carriage for that purpose;" and Holyhead gave him an affectionate squeeze of the arm that made him wince, as they emerged into the portico to ascend the phaeton.

"How do you fellows get back?" said his lordship, as the American horse reared straight on end when he felt the collar. Of course neither of them knew, so it was settled that Landless should return on the box of the brougham, and Charley

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in the narrow place that Bravoura had offered Gilbert inside. Pending this arrangement, however, the American horse would wait no longer, and the phaeton dashed off at the rate of sixteen miles an hour—a pace that was kept up without remark from either of the passengers for some miles. As they neared Kensington, Holyhead took a pull at his horses, and looking down in his friend's face, broke the silence as follows:—

“Curious creatures women, Gilbert. I don't think I'll have anything more to do with that one!”

They *are* curious creatures: *that one* was in the brougham a couple of miles behind him, crying as if her heart would break; and although Charley Wing was a wary youth, who preserved on all topics in which the fair sex were concerned a discreet silence, it might have been gathered from his subsequent demeanour at his club, that he had made a good many pleasanter journeys than the drive home that night from Richmond.

CHAPTER XI

ALARMS—A SKIRMISH

THURSDAY came, and was ushered in by a lowering morning that gradually settled into a pouring wet day—an honest straight-down summer's rain, that soaks you to the skin in ten minutes, and makes the light-coloured garment you have been rash enough to adopt in the metropolis look as if it had been dipped in ink. The cab-stands were empty as the great desert, save where an occasional arrival, with splashed panels and steaming horse, made its appearance for an instant, to be beckoned away again by a fresh fare ere the driver had time to lay his whip athwart the roof of the conveyance, and give his many capes a shake like that of a Newfoundland dog. Hapless pedestrians of both sexes floundered doggedly along, fording the deepest crossings with a defiant recklessness that had proved the worst; whilst those who wore petticoats encumbered their limbs as little as possible with drapery, and displayed their draggled white stockings without reserve. The man who always looks over the first-floor blinds in wet weather, the man whose countenance is of a forbidding cast, and chiefly expressive of blank dismay, occupied his post as usual, retreating at intervals with more than common caution into the dusky recesses of his den. Everybody was draggled and dreary and desponding, save only the London urchin, a stoic whose philosophy is proof against all extraneous influences, and whose equanimity wet and cold, hunger and thirst, scorching skies and nipping frosts, are equally powerless to overcome. Wrapped in a scanty drapery, apparently formed from a discarded coalsack, he stepped jauntily along; his whistle retained its customary richness and volume, his accompaniment against the area-railings its energy and precision. His sense of the ludicrous had lost nothing of its keenness, his wit nothing of its colloquial freedom, his remarkable demeanour none of its eccentricity and self-reliance.

Inside their houses, at least, people ought to have been

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cheerful and good-humoured, glad to have a roof over their heads and dry clothes on their backs. I doubt, however, if it was so. Bad weather with the unoccupied is apt to produce bad humour. The domestic barometer is not uninfluenced by the outward atmosphere. When the material quicksilver stands at "much rain," it is well to provide a moral umbrella in the shape of forbearance and long-suffering; when it gets down to "stormy," it is advisable to look out for squalls.

Those right honourable dames, the Ladies Gertrude and Olivia, did not lose the opportunity. To do them justice, it was but on rare occasions—perhaps three or four times in a season—that they indulged in a grand passage of arms. Such encounters, I am bound to admit, seldom originated with the younger lady, whose spirit, though easily roused against anything like injustice, was not of an aggressive kind. To-day, however, she was unquestionably the invader. It would seem by her tactics that she had meditated an attack for some little time.

Lady Olivia was in the habit of passing her mornings in a small apartment off her principal drawing-room, which she called her boudoir. In this retreat she cast up her accounts, wrangled with her butler, ordered dinner, worked in worsteds, and dozed over a good book. It was, in short, her ladyship's own especial *sanctum*, and the locality was avoided, not to say dreaded, by her intimates and relatives. Even John Gordon's stout heart seldom brought him voluntarily within its precincts; so she was a little surprised to receive an unasked visit from Lady Gertrude, who made her entrance with rather more sweep and rustle of her draperies than was consistent with pacific intentions, and did not forget to shut the door after her with considerable energy. The gonfalon was flung abroad—the first shot was fired. Lady Olivia, nothing loth, cleared for action forthwith.

"Aunt Olivia, can you match me this piece of yellow silk?" was the insidious question, under cover of which the younger lady made, so to speak, her first advance.

The frown deepened on Lady Olivia's dark forehead into a dent between her eyebrows.

"What do you want it for?" she asked abruptly, and by no means with the courteous manner of one who is disposed to grant a favour.

"For my cousin's slippers," answered the other innocently. "I want to get them done by the end of the month. Poor Gilbert will be so disappointed if he don't have them on his birthday!"

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Now, these slippers had been a bone of contention ever since the first stitch had been put into their elaborate toes. Lady Olivia's unnatural dislike of her son had increased of late to an unreasonable pitch. She was jealous of his position, of his fortune, of his popularity—above all, of his favour with his cousin. If she could be said to love anybody in the world it was Gertrude; and, strange to say, the misfortune which she dreaded more than anything on earth was the possibility of her only son and her favourite niece being united in marriage.

"Sit down, Gertrude," she said, with much dignity; "I want to speak to you."

Lady Gertrude sat down with the air of a princess. Her heart beat a thought quicker, and her bright eye sparkled. She felt the *gaudia certaminis* coming on—the Berserkr's noble ecstasy, modified only by sex and situation. She sniffed the approach of battle, the little vixen, and enjoyed its savour.

"Do you think it is either prudent or becoming," commenced the elder lady, steadying her voice with an effort not lost on her antagonist, "to be always occupied in this manner about Gilbert? Why is Gilbert to be made the first person in this house? Why is everything to be deferred to Gilbert—nobody's opinion asked, nobody's wishes consulted but Gilbert's? I have often hinted to you, Gertrude, that there is much to displease and distress me in the terms on which you choose to consider yourself with Gilbert. Now, I must speak out. A young person in your condition cannot be too careful; and I must beg that these *tête-à-tête* walks and interchange of notes and undue familiarities be put a stop to, once for all. Remember, Lady Gertrude, that he is not your brother, but your cousin—that his only connection with you is through me; and you must yourself see—and it ought to shock and distress you much—if you had a particle of right feeling—that he does not treat me like a mother."

She was a skilful fighter, Lady Olivia, and her blade had never rusted for want of practice; but in the present instance she had got her guard the least thing too high. The adversary had expected it, was watching for it, and now went in under it like lightning—

"Do you treat him like a son?" she broke in, with flashing eyes and quick-coming breath. "Do you ever think it worth while to consult him on a single thing you do? Do you ever interest yourself in his pursuits or his occupations? Have you not taught him that this is the house in London in which

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he is least welcome, and that make his home where he will, it shall not be here! Aunt Olivia, I will speak out. Gilbert is going to the dogs as fast as ever he can; and although I do not deny that he has his faults like other people, nobody will be so much to blame for his ruin as his own mamma."

Lady Olivia was staggered. For some months she had suspected that her niece—to borrow an expression from the *manège*—was getting a little out of her hand. She never dreamed, though, that the young lady would break away in so determined a fashion as this. She enjoyed, however, the best of fighting temperaments—that which gets colder and harder the more sharply it is struck; so she rallied her forces, and answered, very loftily—

"Indeed, Lady Gertrude, I have yet to learn that it is my niece's province to teach me my duty towards my son. May I ask, moreover, in what manner that unprincipled young man is 'going to the dogs,' as you elegantly express it, more effectually this season than usual?"

"Oh, Aunt Olivia, how can you talk in that cold heartless manner? Surely you are in the way of hearing all that is said about him, when it reaches even my ears? I am not ignorant of his ill-chosen friendships and foolish intimacies. He is losing himself completely amongst a bad set, and nobody, not even his mother, thinks it worth while to stretch a hand to save him. Aunt Olivia, do you know that he gambles—that he lost ever so much last week at Newmarket, and that if he goes on like this he will be ruined by the end of the year?"

"I'm never surprised at hearing of my son's folly," answered his mother. "He rejected my advice once for all when he came of age, and I washed my hands of him from that time forth. I think I know my duty, Lady Gertrude, better than you can teach it me."

"At all events I have done mine," retorted the girl. "I had determined to appeal to you, to rouse you, to show you how unkind and harsh you have been to Gilbert. Poor fellow! Listen to me, Aunt Olivia. He has never had a chance—he has never had a home. If we do nothing for him here, I can see he will go irremediably to ruin."

"Perhaps you would like to reclaim him yourself, and give him a home of which you should be the mistress?" retorted the other, in her hard sarcastic tones. "In my time young ladies used to wait till they were asked, and did not fling themselves gratuitously at a gentleman's head, simply because the gentleman was utterly unprincipled and good for nothing."



JMS Greer

"Say that again, and I leave the house"

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Lady Gertrude rose to her feet. If such had been her wish equally with her intention, this home-thrust would probably have finished the contest once for all. The wound, however, though sufficiently painful, did not bleed inwardly, and she had strength to hold her own.

“Say that again, aunt, and I leave the house, if I have to walk without my bonnet through the rain,” was her spirited reply; and she marched back into the drawing-room with head up and gonfalon waving, and, indeed, all the honours of war. It was a drawn battle, but hers had been the assault; and as she retreated in good order, she could not but think that at least she had lost no advantage, and had gained a certain *prestige* by the very boldness of her attack. She liked her cousin, too, very much. She thought him, as indeed he was, unfortunate in his domestic relations. She pitied him with a gentle womanly pity, and felt for him all the more kindly that she had ruffled her own and her aunt’s feathers on his behalf; but she was scarcely in a frame of mind to balance at that moment the advantages and disadvantages of the match to which the latter had so coarsely alluded; and as, however near akin pity may be to love, nothing irritates a woman so much as the idea of being won unwooed, it is probable that Gilbert lost more than he gained in his cousin’s regard by the above passage of arms in Lady Olivia’s boudoir.

Its occupant sat and nursed her wrath to keep it warm. Strange to say, it was excited not against the niece who had defied her, but against her son. The more she thought of his advantages, his position, his independence of herself, the more she felt hurt and irritated that he should be thus able to neglect her counsels, and set at nought her authority. It is a sad and morbid feeling, that jealousy of a parent towards a child. Like all such passions, it is strong in proportion as it is unnatural. He was the same Gilbert from whose affection she had turned so wilfully when he was a winning urchin. In his prime of manhood, beloved and admired by all, her heart hardened itself against him more bitterly and resolutely than ever. She thought of Lady Gertrude’s beauty, of her success in society, of her noble birth and patrician bearing, of her thirty thousand pounds—for the young lady was quite independent of her heart, and hers was no empty threat when she talked of leaving the house. The more she thought, the more determined she became that her son should not carry off the prize.

Hour after hour passed away. The weather cleared, the sun shone forth, the trees in the square flickered and glistened

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in the light. Open carriages splashed through the streets, and the Babylonians emerged, gaudy and gladsome, like butterflies after a storm; but still Lady Olivia sat in her dreary boudoir, and still the frown deepened on her forehead, and still the gloom closed in darker and darker about her heart.

The drones, you see, are not so very happy after all, because they *are* drones. The normal condition of this terrestrial hive of ours seems to be something between a struggle and a crawl. If labour is not thrust upon us, we make it or purchase it for ourselves; and as I have been informed, by those who have experienced its discipline, that the treadmill entails far more exhaustive exertions than any honest method of breadwinning, so the artificial difficulties which we pile up in our own way are harder to surmount than those which nature provides for our exercise. One of the bees has had a severe day of it—gathering honey in the rain; her gauzy wings have been soaked and draggled, her flight weary and long sustained, the flowers which she has probed not always the sweetest or most attractive in the garden. To descend from metaphor into plain English, Mrs. Latimer has done a good day's work—teaching stupid pupils, relieved by intervening wrangles with unreasonable cabmen. She has got very wet, but she has no time to catch cold. She is very weary, but feels neither out of spirits, nor out of humour; and she sits down in her homely lodging to a cup of tea, in such a frame of mind as Lady Olivia in her fine house does not experience once in a twelvemonth.

Poor Mrs. Latimer! She has not many relaxations, and to-day is one to be marked with white chalk, because she is going to a dinner-party at an alderman's villa in the Regent's Park. Think of this, you fine ladies, who can scarce get through one-half of your pleasure engagements!—you who have two or three gatherings to attend every night in the week—who grudge the labour of dining with your cousin over the way, unless the right people be invited to meet you, and who, even if the right people do come, are thinking half the time about when you shall get away to go somewhere else. How would you like to give lessons in Bloomsbury at nine in the morning, and in Bayswater at five in the afternoon?—to rise up early, and late take rest, in order to earn the bread of carefulness, that bitter morsel which alone fails to justify the proverb that you cannot eat your cake and have it?—to live from hand to mouth, and feel that a day's illness or a day's idleness is literally an irreparable loss?—and to look upon a party at Alderman Jones' as the acme of gaiety and

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dissipation? Perhaps you would be happier than you are now! As in your own gorgeous dinners *à la russe*, so in your artificial lives, there are many rare exotics and many tempting fruits placed before you which you must neither taste nor touch—you are but at a Barmecide banquet after all. The lip may be never so dry, but you dare not stretch your hand for the forbidden apple; and the waters of Mara, like the waters of Vichy, are none the more palatable because you drain them from a cup of gold.

Mrs. Latimer sat over her tea, and enjoyed the luxury of rest. She was naturally of a hopeful, sunshiny disposition; and although her lot had been one to damp the animal spirits and cloud the gaiety of heart which belonged to her temperament, there were times when the light would break through, when the buds would put forth their leaves, and, if only for half an hour, the desert would smile and blossom like the rose.

To-day was one of these hopeful occasions. The lodging seemed more cheerful than usual—the engagements, each of which represented a definite amount of the “necessary evil,” more numerous. That was doubtless a very pretty dinner-dress spread out yonder on the bed, with its delicate white skirts and its black bows and ribbons. Ada was a woman, after all. She could not but look in the glass and be well content with what she saw there—such a gloss on the soft smooth hair, and a colour on her cheek like a rose after the rain! She turned away with a smile and a sigh, yet the expression of her face certainly denoted neither dissatisfaction nor despondency. She anticipated her evening’s amusement with calm gratification, and she did not look forward an inch beyond. It was as well for her that she did not! And yet, could she have foreseen the results of that night’s entertainment, it is possible that the white dress, despite its killing bows, might have been consigned unworn to its place in the wardrobe.

CHAPTER XII

“DINNER IS ON THE TABLE!”

“**M**R. ORME, you have not been introduced to the parrot,” said Miss Jones, as, rustling about in her capacity of hostess, she endeavoured to relieve the awkwardness of that five minutes before dinner, during which English people who do not know each other seem to cherish such deadly enmity towards those with whom they are going to sit at meat. Now, the parrot was an invaluable aid on such occasions — his vocabulary was so extensive, comprising many professional exclamations picked up on his voyage home, and less startling between decks than in a London drawing-room — his musical attainments were so varied. He could sing “I’d be a Butterfly,” part of “The Ratcatcher’s Daughter,” and the first bar of “Beautiful Venice!” and his general accomplishments were so constantly on the increase — for he caught up any sound or expression often repeated — that he was a fund of conversation in himself. “Polly, you must be civil to Mr. Orme.”

“Ay, ay, sir!” answered the bird in his goblin notes, and with a shrill whistle dashed at once into the popular couplet, “She was not born in Westminster,” and then stuck his head on one side and looked up so knowingly, that Gilbert could but laugh; and his subsequent introduction to Miss Bullingdon and Mrs. Latimer, the latter of whom he had recognised directly he entered the room, lost much of its formality, and placed the three at once upon terms of easy politeness.

Miss Jones, meanwhile, walked off to do her duty by Mrs. Bullingdon. The alderman, ruddy and radiant, and thoroughly in his glory, rang for dinner; and Miss Blanche stole a good look upward at her new acquaintance, and thought in her virgin heart he might be a desirable conquest — at all events, there was no harm in trying.

Gilbert was the latest arrival. Truth compels me to confess, he was so ashamed of his childish impatience that he had waited ten minutes after he was dressed before he

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permitted himself to get into his cab. Five of these he made up by overdriving his horse, and the other five brought him to the exact nick of time at which the alderman ordered dinner. He had not, therefore, much leisure to improve his acquaintance with the two ladies who hung with him over the parrot's cage.

Mrs. Latimer was no whit different from what he expected—neither plainer nor handsomer, nor more nor less becomingly dressed. Before he had been three minutes in the room with her, it seemed as though in some previous stage of being, or in some inexplicable manner, they must have known each other before. This Pythagorean introduction, however, did not appear to have placed him much at his ease. London man as he was, for the first time in his life he found himself dying to speak to a woman, and at a loss for something to say.

Miss Bullingdon, however, was resolved to lose no time, and commenced operations on him forthwith:—“Did he like parrots? Was he fond of birds? Had he a bullfinch of his own? She herself possessed a canary and a pair of love-birds. Did Mr. Orme admire love-birds? The worst of them was, that if one died, the other was sure to pine away and die too. Wasn't it pretty of them?—they always did so—or,” as Miss Blanche touchingly remarked, “they wouldn't be love-birds!”

Mrs. Latimer smiled; Gilbert laughed outright; and at this pathetic juncture the butler entered with the welcome announcement of dinner.

So the party paired off, the alderman offering his arm to Mrs. Bullingdon, and finding even his own capacious doorways much too small for the passage of two such first-raters alongside; Bullingdon following with Mrs. Latimer, and thinking, we may be sure, much more of the good things in store for him than of the lady on his arm; John Gordon coupled with Blanche Bullingdon, somewhat to Bella's disappointment; and that young lady herself, in her right of hostess, under the care of Gilbert, as being the principal person of the party. The rear was brought up by two stray men, City friends of their host—the one an innocuous young gentleman of no particular calibre, who always agreed with everybody; the other an old wizened individual, in a black stock, and one-eyed, bent, shrunk, and faded, with the star of a bullet-mark on his cheekbone. What a life had his been compared to any of the others! He had led three forlorn hopes, had been broke by court-martial; had married a West

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Indian heiress, been ruined, divorced; had been a slave-dealer, perhaps a pirate; commanded a free corps in South America, and managed a mining company in Paraguay; had seen life in all its most thrilling phases and its most varied ups and downs. Now he lived in a lodging in Long Acre, and was glad to get a good dinner when he was invited to one, and a chop and pint of ale for a shilling when he was not.

On entering the dining-room and taking Miss Jones to the farther end, Gilbert found that Fate had been propitious, and that the vacant chair for his occupation was between Mrs. Latimer and his young hostess. John Gordon, too, was on the other side of the latter, so that, when the turtle was handed round, at least three of the guests were quite satisfied with the disposition of the party. Bella, with her high colour and black hair, looked very well in a deep pink dress, a little overdone with trimming, and did the honours, as ladies call it, gracefully enough. Her slight touch of shyness was less awkward than engaging. The alderman, at the bottom of the table, actually shone with good-humour. The turtle was clear and excellent, its green fat glutinous and abundant. "The blest sherbet sublimed with snow" had been but ditch-water compared with the ice-punch. When it gurgled over Bullingdon's organs of deglutition, wrapped as they were in an acre of starch and cambric, that worthy's whole countenance and demeanour softened to the genial influence.

Jones winked deliberately at his old friend.

"It's the same article, squire," said he; "not bad to take, if you only take enough of it. Have another glass."

Will anybody tell me why his intimates almost always dub a Hertfordshire proprietor with the generic title of "squire"?

Red mullet packs very easily above turtle. Sweet and dry champagne taste none the worse that they have been preceded by cold punch. The alderman prided himself on his dinners. Ere he had entered his own walk in the haunch, everybody's tongue seemed loosened, and the ladies began to show more of their faces and less of their shoulders to their immediate neighbours. Mrs. Bullingdon, a person of limited views, took advantage of her host's operations on the venison to engage the indefinite youth on such topics as she was capable of originating—

"How nice it was to get out into the country! And was not the Regent's Park a delightful locality?"

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He agreed with Mrs. Bullingdon most completely.

“It was wrong, though, to allow the Zoological to be open to anyone on Sundays. The Society were very much to blame. In all other respects they managed it admirably. Did he not think so?”

Mrs. Bullingdon’s opinions and his own coincided in every particular.

“She was there only last Monday with B. It was very sweet about sunset, after the beasts were fed.”

Again he agreed with her, though I do not, wondering feebly, as he was ignorant of her name, what B. was, and inclining to think it must be a pet of some description—possibly a poodle. B. in the meantime, albeit attending earnestly to the main object of the entertainment, found leisure to relate to his neighbour with one eye the particulars of his last battue at Bullingdon Butts, where he resided; and the battered old adventurer, who had seen blood flow like water, and whose game, for many a year of his strange life, had been the unfeathered biped, listened with the utmost deference and attention. He respected Bullingdon because he looked “the sort of man that would give you a good dinner.”

“Bella, dear, how are you getting on up there?” quoth the alderman, as a pause in his labours, and the placing of something *en tortue* before his daughter, enabled him to take breath and look about him; “I hope you take care of Mr. Gilbert. It’s your deal, you know. I daresay John Gordon will cut for you. John, a glass of wine. Squire, will you join us?”

Bullingdon savoured every drop of the golden liquid as it passed slowly down beneath the tie of his neckcloth; then he smacked his great lips and expressed his approval—

“It’s good wine, Jones; good champagne, and just enough iced. You got it from Paris. There’s no more left. I had the last of the batch myself.”

No compliment could be greater. The alderman was delighted. Happy the man who can be so easily pleased!

Independent of her juxtaposition to John Gordon, which of itself was sufficient to make her a little preoccupied, Bella was a young hostess, and, unconsciously, somewhat fidgety about the success of the entertainment. Consequently, Gilbert’s efforts to amuse her often fell short of the mark; and as he observed her eye and her attention equally fixed elsewhere, he had himself the more leisure to follow his own inclinations, and improve his acquaintance with the guest

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whose face and tones he knew too well possessed for him a peculiar fascination.

Gilbert! Gilbert! will you take no warning? What is this very instinct but a placard, so to speak, advertising you that the ice is dangerous? On you skate recklessly, though it cracks and sways beneath you. In you will go overhead. What a ducking you will have! Perhaps you will never get your head above the surface again!

I have heard it affirmed by the vanity of man, that if you would make the agreeable to a fair neighbour at the dinner-table, it is judicious to abstain from hurrying her at first, and to give her plenty of time to settle before you commence operations. When she has pecked at her food, like some dainty bird, and sipped at her champagne, and had, moreover, leisure to look about her, and to think, "Is he going to speak to me or not?" it is time enough to hazard your first observation. This is probably a harmless platitude, provoking an equally harmless reply; but from that moment your boat is launched. You are afloat on the stream that leads—who knows where? *Dieu vous garde!* If you get capsized, you are more likely to sink than to swim.

Ada had stolen a good look at her neighbour whilst he was dutifully conversing with Miss Jones. In her heart she distinctly approved of what she saw. His exterior was sufficiently pleasing to the feminine eye. His manner had a charm in it that seldom failed to work its way. It was far more refined, and at the same time more natural, than that of the men whom she was accustomed to meet, or of those who belonged to the dissipated set in which her husband used to live. The German blood, too, stirred within her, to sympathise with a certain leavening of ideality and romance, which all the conventionalities of society could not completely hide. His voice, too, was *very* taking and kindly. When he turned to her with the simplest observation about some dish on the table, she could not but feel and show that she was pleased, and she answered with more animation than was usual in the staid and retiring music-mistress.

They soon got deep into conversation. They talked of her mother's country and her mother's tongue. When Gilbert got rid of his dandyism he was worth listening to; and on the present occasion there was a tone of softness in his voice, a shade almost of embarrassment in his manner, such as women are very quick to detect, and which the haughtiest of them cannot but accept as an involuntary tribute of admiration. They liked the same places, the same books,

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the same flowers, the same music; and her eye sparkled and deepened, while her cheek glowed with the unwonted pleasure of a kindred spirit's converse, though only for an hour at a dinner-table.

“Do you know, Mrs. Latimer,” said he, looking straight in her face with frank honest eyes, “that I have heard you sing?” And he went on to tell her of his attendance at the concert, and the delight he had experienced (only he rather broke down in the confession) at her song; all this quite simply, and as if her singing in public was as much a matter of course as her being there. She liked him all the better. She was pleased to feel that he thought none the lower of her that she did not belong to his own sphere of society; and her own tact acknowledged the intuitive delicacy by which he was certain that she would shrink no more from the allusion than he did himself. She thought she would like him to hear that song once again, not in public, but sung on purpose for him. Ada, too, was entering unawares into the stream. Already it was over her ankles. Let us hope her boots were waterproof, and her foothold firm.

She was quite sorry when it was time to retire to the drawing-room. When Bella, fitting on her gloves, telegraphed sailing orders to Mrs. Bullingdon, and that lady, rising from amidst her draperies, shook out a cloud of canvas, and forged majestically ahead, she would have liked to indulge in one backward glance as she departed; but for that very reason, be sure, she avoided anything of the kind, or she would not have been Ada Latimer. Bella had no such scruples. Besides, she was the last of the convoy. So she shot a Parthian shaft at John Gordon, unfortunately lost on its object, who was at that moment reaching over for the grapes, and obeying his host's injunction to “close in.”

Warned by Actæon's fate, we do not presume to follow the ladies to their bower. Rather let us remain and discuss the magnum of claret which circulates so rapidly under the alderman's auspices—fresh, fragrant, and blushing, like the cup of youth, to be quaffed as greedily, to ebb as quickly, and to leave at last nothing but an empty bottle! Bullingdon liked good claret: so do I. He drank it in large quantities, and expatiated between-whiles on his preserves at Bullingdon Butts, and the different projectiles with which he made war upon the feathered race. He mentioned from what a small particle of shot a woodcock might meet its death; and the conversation becoming general, turned upon the tenacity of life in different natures, and at last upon the easiest method

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of quitting it for the human subject. Hitherto the one-eyed man had preserved unbroken silence, sticking like a leech, nevertheless, to a bottle of rare old port. This, however, was a topic with which he was familiar, and he stated his opinion without hesitation.

"Bleeding's easiest for grown men and women," observed the old gentleman, filling his glass. "I've bled a dozen and more to death whilst the men were at dinner. They scarce seem to feel it after the first gash."

Bullington pushed his chair three feet farther off, with a look at his neighbour which it is impossible to convey. There was a pause of astonishment, and the old gentleman proceeded with the utmost *sang froid*—

"I was running a cargo—that's a *black* cargo—from the Gold Coast. Got driven by bad weather to the southward, and found myself becalmed in the Bight of Benin. Water short, schooner overmanned, and the cargo bad off for stowage; though we had a third on deck, leg-hampered, day and night. It *was* warm down in the hold; for though she was a sweet craft, d'ye see, she hadn't been built for the trade, and I'd altered her run myself, when I ought to have known better. My first mate was a long-winded chap. I think he never left off whistling for a week; but the schooner headed all round the compass just the same. I thought I should never see a cat's-paw again. Well, the cargo suffered *horrible*. It's bad to be thirsty in these low latitudes when there is nothing to drink. I was obliged to make away with some of them to save the rest. I divided them into watches, and put the weakest of the men and the oldest of the women into the condemned watch, giving each a chance by lot, according as the weather should hold. First I took and hove them overboard one by one, thinking it was a cool and merciful death for the poor thirsty creatures; but I'm a humane man, sir, and I couldn't bear to see their eyes—specially the women—as they went over the side. Have you ever watched a face, sir, just when the last chance is up? It's an ugly sight, a very ugly sight," said the old gentleman, with a retrospective sigh, filling his glass the while.

Bullington, to whom this ghastly narrative was especially addressed, could not find a voice to reply. He set his wine down untasted, and looked as if he was going to be sick.

"Well, sir," resumed the slave-owner, "I'd a surgeon's mate aboard, a sharpish fellow enough—he was hanged afterwards at Porto Rico—says he to me, 'Skipper,' says he, 'it's cruel

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work to frighten these poor devils to death before you put 'em to death.' Says he, 'If you'll give me leave, and a couple of hands to swab, I'll just 'tice 'em in here, in the cook's galley, and finish them off on the quiet, as nice as possible.' So I went in with him, as in duty bound—for a man's not fit to command a ship, I say, unless he knows all that's going on in that ship—and I kept a bright look-out, though I let him use his own tools in his own way. He was a neat workman—a very neat workman—to be sure. He just slipped a lancet into the jugular (here, you see, under the ear), and they bled to death—a baker's dozen of 'em—as easy as I could crack a biscuit. The breeze got up after this, and I'd a rare good run to the Cape de Verde Islands, but I never had a chance afterwards. It was a bad speculation was that—a bad speculation from one end of the log to the other!”

“Gracious heavens!” burst out Bullingdon, in a white heat; “can you bear to talk of such horrors? Can you bear to think of your victims? Shall you ever forget them till your dying day?”

The old gentleman shook his head, and emptied the bottle.

“I can bear most things,” he said, “I've had such a many ups and downs; but I don't think I ever shall forget that calm. It wouldn't have cost me less than seventy-five dollars a-head, even for the weakest of them. Seventy-five dollars a-head!” he repeated thoughtfully; “no, I don't think I ever shall forget it!”

Nobody seemed to care about any more wine after this. Even the madeira remained untouched; and Bullingdon was as near having a fit as a man can be. The only clear idea that remained in his head, was an earnest wish to get away from his neighbour; and excellent as were its dinners, hospitable as was its owner, I think the one-eyed old gentleman might have starved ten times over before he would be asked to place his legs under the mahogany at Bullingdon Butts.

In the drawing-room, people breathed more freely. There being nothing more to drink, the one-eyed man took his departure; and the indefinite youth, unguardedly answering in the affirmative to the alderman's question about cutting in, found himself set down to the abstruse science of whist for the rest of the evening, with Mrs. Bullingdon for a partner—an arrangement not tending to mitigate the alarm with which he already regarded that excellent lady.

Blanche Bullingdon, still hankering slightly after the conquest of Mr. Orme, was, of course, asked to play. Equally,

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of course, she did play—accurately, conscientiously, in excellent time, and without a particle of feeling; the rest of the party, with the exception of the quartette at the whist-table, hovering round the pianoforte, and expressing their approval with much cordiality. So Miss Blanche put on her bracelets once more, assumed her handkerchief, and said, "Thank you, Mr. Orme," for her gloves, and looked as if she thought she had acquitted herself very creditably. Then it was time for Bella to ask "dear Mrs. Latimer" to sing, "if she didn't mind, she was always so good-natured;" and "dear Mrs. Latimer" took her seat on the music-stool, and hesitated for a moment, and burst forth into *the* song with just one instantly averted glance at Gilbert as she did so. It caught his eye, nevertheless; and Ada felt herself blushing painfully, and thought that never in her life had she sung with so little grace and self-command. If one of her listeners agreed with her, his countenance very much belied him; yet he was the only one who did not ask for it again—the only one who did not speak a syllable when she had done.

Pending all this music, Polly had necessarily been banished to the billiard-room, and he was now heard enlivening his exile with such shameless volubility, that Bella was forced to go and remonstrate with him.

"Miss Bullingdon, you play billiards?" asked Bella, with polite attention to her guest; and Blanche, who could use a mace as ineffectively as any other lady, answered in the affirmative, with an appealing look at Mr. Orme. Gilbert seemed lost in contemplation of a landscape on the wall, so Miss Blanche's glance was wasted on the parting of his back hair. John Gordon good-naturedly proposed a match with the young lady, if Miss Jones would come and mark.

"Of course I will," said Bella. "But let us go through the windows; it is such a beautiful night, and there's such a moon!"

Now the Villa, like an Indian bungalow, was built with all its principal rooms on the ground-floor; consequently it was as easy, besides being infinitely pleasanter, to step out by a French window into the garden, and so by the terrace in again at the glass door of the billiard-room, as to walk through a second drawing-room and a library in order to reach the same apartment. Leaving the whist-players engrossed with their rubbers, the remaining five strolled out into the lovely summer night, flooded with moonshine, and even here, almost in London, fragrant with perfume. As Mrs. Latimer followed the billiard-players along the terrace, her dress caught in some trellis-work through which a creeper

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wound its snake-like growth. Gilbert stopped to extricate it—a process which takes considerable time if you would not tear the fabric, and which is prone to call up ideas totally irrelevant to the task itself, originating in the relative position of the individuals—the one generally on his knees, and the other necessarily stooping over him. In the present instance the enlargement occupied several seconds, told very distinctly one by one on a couple of living timepieces which people wear inside their breasts, and there was a flush on Gilbert's brow when he raised it—the result probably of stooping so soon after dinner. It was natural, surely, that the couple thus isolated should linger a few minutes longer out of doors to enjoy the air—equally natural that they should have very little to say to each other, and should consequently preserve an unbroken taciturnity. I have watched the progress and development of some few flirtations that have been thrust upon my observation. I think the talking ones are the safest. A full heart does not discharge itself through the organs of speech; and a very imperceptible tremor on a very commonplace remark may tell a tale that three volumes octavo would fail to convey. Gilbert lost the precious moments in silence. He who could find plenty of small-talk to amuse the smartest ladies in London, was baffled like the veriest clown by the presence of one who would scarcely be considered a gentleman in the set to which he belonged. This worldly polish doubtless hardens while it brightens, and the burnished breastplate is impervious to ninety-nine out of a hundred weapons in the *mêlée*; but wait till the charmed lance comes: deep, deep into the bosom it runs through mail and plate, and the knight's dazzling harness shields him no safer than the yeoman's homespun tweed.

I am constrained to admit that long as this pair lingered out of doors, neither of them spoke a syllable beyond Ada's faint acknowledgment of the preservation of her dress, till they were on the steps of the billiard-room, when Gilbert took heart of grace, and managed to get out what he wanted to say—

“Thank you, Mrs. Latimer, for singing that song. It has haunted me for a week. Thank you so very much.”

She looked up at him once more as she passed in, but did not repeat the experiment during the rest of the evening. Only she shook hands with him when he went away; and, when she got back to her own solitary lodgings, sat far into the night before she went to bed, postponing, as it were, the division of the pleasant day she had spent from the

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morrow's return to working life. It was but a gleam, of course, this sunshine, and there was an end of it ; but still she liked to bask in the remembrance of its warmth. So she looked in the glass again before she undid her hair, and turned from it as before with a smile and a sigh.

Nor was Gilbert the least sleepy. After setting John Gordon down he drove straight home, and dismissed his cab. Then he smoked three cigars, the consumption of which, as I calculate, would last about an hour and twenty minutes, walking round and round Grosvenor Square, thinking of everything in heaven and earth except philosophy—of the moon, of the stars, of Mrs. Latimer's soft eyes, and how resolved he was that, come what might, it should not be long before he saw her again.

CHAPTER XIII

DIPLOMACY



JOHN GORDON was by no means given to making rash promises. The wariest of weasels, however, is, on occasion, to be caught asleep, and John, in a moment of *abandon*, had promised Miss Jones that she should receive an invitation to Lady Olivia's coming "at home," in Belgrave Square—a rash pledge, forsooth, and one not to be redeemed save by a great expenditure of management and diplomacy.

To my reader of the workaday world—say, our honest businesslike man of five-and-forty (if such should indeed condescend to glance over these frivolous pages)—it may seem unaccountable that the slightest interest should attach to a piece of glazed cardboard, entitling the recipient to stand in full dress on a crowded staircase for two or three hours of a summer's night? If he be a bachelor, I should despair of making clear to him these Eleusinian mysteries. He is innocent of the *autopsia*; he knows nothing of *Hierophantes*, who, as I take it, was the Athenian beadle; and the *petroma* is to him a sealed volume. Let him remain in his ignorance, and bless himself the while. But if he be a family man, rejoicing in a vine and olive branches, an expensive wife and blooming daughters, they will explain to him, if they have not impressed it on him already, how such a cartel constitutes a veritable diploma, the full reward for many months of competitive energy and serious application. They will tell him how to be seen at Lady Olivia's is a recognition of that position which entitles them to call on Lady Barthedore, that Lady Barthedore's intimates have the *entrée* to Ormolu House, and that from Ormolu House to the seventh heaven is but one step. *Beatus ille procul a negotiis* of such kind, say I. Alas! for John Gordon's rash engagement, and the negotiations that must ensue. He had so much real business to do

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that it was not till the very day of the fête that he found leisure to call in Belgrave Square. He had written a note, however, in the morning to Lady Gertrude, respecting some of that young lady's trifling commissions, and expressing a hope that he should find her at home during some part of the day, and had received, as he expected, a laconic answer, in the well-known hand:—

“My dear Mr. Gordon” (it used to be “Dear Mr. Gordon”), “Aunt Olivia wants to see you very much. Tea as usual at 4.30.” And signed with a flourishing monogrammatic “G,” of which Gertrude was rather proud.

He felt he should be welcome; he had not seen any of them since the concert. No one knew better than John Gordon the weight of the French maxim, *il faut se faire valoir*.

Behold him, then, at 4.30, sitting in a corner of the large drawing-room with a teacup in his hand, preparing to do battle with two ladies on a point which was calculated to call forth all the natural wilfulness of the species. Heavy odds, even for Mr. Gordon. The house was thoroughly uncomfortable. As, in a ship cleared for action, everything seemed out of its place, and put in everybody's way. Like the same ship after the contest, it would take some days before the effects of the *bouleversement* should disappear. John said as much.

“People ought to be very grateful to you, Lady Olivia, for putting yourself to all this inconvenience. How many cards have you sent out?”

Her ladyship named the number graciously enough; she liked to think she was fulfilling the onerous duties of her rank. John proceeded warily—

“How right you are not to ask twice as many people as the house will hold. Now at Mrs. Montpellier's, last night, I never got farther than the awning!”

Lady Olivia's smile was stern. It is needless to say that she held staunchly by the Visigoth faction, and if poor Mrs. M. had been a Suttee widow, and burned alive on the occasion in question, she would have listened with grim approval.

“We don't visit Mrs. Montpellier,” said Gertrude, rather mischievously. “I should like to know her, I think; she's certainly handsome, and looks as if she ought to be amusing.”

“She's more a friend of Gilbert's than mine,” answered the gentleman; “only having a card, I thought I would look in for five minutes, which I didn't. I think if I had a sister I shouldn't take her to Mrs. Montpellier's. It's a great thing for a girl when first she comes out, to go to a few good places,

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only a very few, and those very good ones," quoth John, as gravely as if he had studied nothing but the Social Humbug all his life.

"You are quite right," asserted Lady Olivia; "if I take a young lady by the hand, I am most particular as to her engagements. Gertrude's first year, I only allowed her two outings in the week. A good introduction is everything. It is of vital importance. Without a good introduction a girl is inevitably lost!"

Lady Olivia expatiated on this point, as one might who should keep the gates of Paradise and proclaim the easiest way therein. She had herself enjoyed this unspeakable advantage. Nobody's "introduction" could have been better. Had her lines indeed fallen to her in such pleasant places? had she been resting ever since by the margin of living waters, among the fields of Asphodel?

"The very reason I recommended a young friend of mine not to go to Mrs. Montpellier's last night," observed the astute John. "If it was Lady Barthedore's, or Ormolu House, or here, for instance, I told her it would be a different thing; but this is your first season, I said; you don't know many people, mind you only know *good* ones."

Lady Gertrude made a funny little face; she was not deficient in penetration; while her aunt signified a gracious approval.

"You see your way more clearly than most people," the latter observed encouragingly; "men so seldom can be made to understand these matters. Poor Mr. Orme would ask all sorts of people out of the highways and hedges, and expect me not only to be civil to them, but to know them, and their wives afterwards."

If *poor* Mr. Orme, who was held by certain observers to have justly earned that epithet previous to his decease, really cherished any such expectations, he must have been grievously disappointed.

"I take a great interest in this girl," resumed John; whereat Lady Gertrude glanced quickly in his face; "and I should like to see her well launched. I wish you would let me introduce her to you, Lady Olivia."

"Would she like a card for to-night?" inquired her ladyship, very graciously; "I should be happy to take her by the hand, I am sure, if she is a nice person, and belongs to people that one knows."

Now here was the difficulty. Alderman Jones, in the execution of his duties as her son's guardian, had come

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frequently in contact with Lady Olivia, and it speaks well for the alderman's good-humour that their discussions had never terminated in an outbreak. He was an old friend and schoolfellow of her husband; the boys had been at Charter House together, when the latter was a second son with but modest expectations; and this youthful alliance had served to recommend him but little to Lady Olivia. She had always strenuously set her face against having anything to do with "the Joneses, my dear, except in the way of business." And Gertrude, who was as prejudiced a little aristocrat as ever a one of the great Whig family to which she belonged, backed up her aunt firmly in this determination, if in no other.

John resolved to secure one ally, at least; so he turned to Lady Gertrude.

"It is for Miss Jones," said he, "that I would venture to ask this great favour. I dined there lately, as you know I often do with my good partner. I met Gilbert, of all people in the world! and I thought he seemed very much smitten with the young lady. You know he is not very susceptible, so when he does strike his flag, it is all the greater compliment."

Now, this was one of those chance shots which, like the missile of an ambushed sportsman, though aimed at a single duck, brings down a whole troop of wild-fowl, splashing and quacking, and scattering over the water. At the first mention of the ominous name, the younger lady gave a little toss of her shapely head, whilst the elder's brow grew black as midnight; but when the supposed conquest of the hard-hearted Gilbert was reported, a sudden change seemed to show itself simultaneously in each. John had judged, and rightly, that proud Gertrude would support him vehemently in any request he might make, rather than be supposed capable of jealousy of a Miss Jones. But he had not calculated on Lady Olivia's speedy acquiescence in any measure which might tend further to separate the two cousins. So he was not surprised when Lady Gertrude answered quickly, and with rising colour—

"Oh, by all means, let us have her, Aunt Olivia; poor girl, it will be a charity to take her away from the savages on the other side of Oxford Street, if only for one night, and to show her the manners and customs of the civilised English in the nineteenth century."

But he was a little astonished to mark Lady Olivia's frown gradually subside as he concluded his sentence. That lady, however, was incapable of granting a favour gracefully. She always seemed to think its value enhanced by the

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difficulty with which it was wrung from her. So she coughed ominously as she replied—

“I fear I have already exceeded my stated number, Mr. Gordon; and I do not wish my house to be quite as crowded as your friend Mrs. Montpellier’s.”

“I know it is a very great favour,” said John; “and I assure you, Lady Olivia, I would not have asked anyone to do me such a kindness but yourself.”

Whilst at the same moment Gertrude interposed eagerly—

“Oh, pray send her a card, Aunt Olivia; one more won’t make any difference, even with our large dresses; though Charley Wing does say that every soldier occupies eighteen inches on parade, and every lady eighteen feet! Say yes, Aunt Olivia, and I’ll write a card for Mr. Gordon in a moment.”

Thus adjured, Lady Olivia said yes, though not very graciously; and so it was decided that Bella Jones should be supremely blest that very night. Diplomatic John Gordon had gained his point, and that was always sufficient for John, who, like a great man of the last century, confined himself to doing one thing at one time, and did it, in consequence, effectually. Perhaps he gained more than his point without knowing it. In the general conversation which ensued, Lady Gertrude was not so talkative as usual. Neither did she endorse her aunt’s invitation to a spare place in the well-known barouche then waiting at the door, an invitation the busy gentleman was compelled somewhat reluctantly to decline; but when he lingered for a few moments after the elder lady’s departure to prepare for her drive, Gertrude lingered too—not because *he* did, of course, for she went to the writing-table in the back drawing-room, and proceeded to fill in a printed card for Miss Jones. That simple patronymic contains but five letters, and the day of the month requires no great effort of caligraphy, yet it took Lady Gertrude two or three minutes to accomplish her task. Then she came back to John and put the card in his hand with a little scornful curtsey, and rather a forced smile.

“Is Miss Jones really a nice person?” she asked, turning away to inspect minutely the mignonette in the window.

“Good-humoured—unaffected. Yes, a very nice girl, I should say,” answered John; as what else could he answer?

“And very beautiful, too, is she not?” pursued the lady.

“Many people admire her, I believe,” replied he abstractedly, and, truth to tell, somewhat tired of the subject.

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“Do you think her pretty?” said Gertrude, turning round with a quick searching glance. Rapid as it was, John’s eyes met hers, and a faint blush came into his pale cheek.

“No, I can’t say I do,” was his reply; and the tone in which he spoke would have carried conviction to the most incredulous.

Lady Gertrude was evidently not on terms of ceremony with Mr. Gordon, for she bounded upstairs to put on her things, without wishing him good-bye, and a minute afterwards was singing as merrily over her toilet as her own canary-bird. When she came down again, Lady Olivia was ready in the drawing-room, but Mr. Gordon was gone. If she had expected to find him there, she bore her disappointment bravely enough. Even the footman who shut up the carriage-steps after her thought he had never seen his young lady look so well and so cheerful—“saucy” would have been his expression had he been capable of reducing his reflections to his own vernacular—as on that bright summer afternoon.

And John Gordon, having enclosed and sealed up the precious document, stepped into Piccadilly to drop it into the nearest post-office. It had cost Lady Olivia’s writing-table *two* envelopes, though, for he spoiled the first by addressing it to

“The LADY GERTRUDE JONES,
“Verbena Villa,
“Regent’s Park.”

CHAPTER XIV

PELIDES

THE son of Peleus, flinging his shield abroad in high defiance, as it would seem, of his equestrian rival perched on the gate of Constitution Hill over against him, must have acquired ere this a degree of philosophy and *savoir vivre* for which he was not distinguished in the days when he sulked in his tent by the sounding sea, and chafed to hear of high-crested Hector crashing through the battle under the walls of Troy. How many London seasons has he stood there in his naked bronze, and watched the living kaleidoscope in Hyde Park, ever varying, ever on the move, tossing its tinsel into a thousand combinations, gaudy, purposeless, and provokingly alike.

Since our fair countrywomen put him up in honour of one whose fame shall outlast his own, he has indeed witnessed some unimportant changes. He has seen Grosvenor Gate deserted for the banks of the Serpentine, and the wooden rails in the Ride converted into iron; also the introduction of penny chairs in that locality, an imitation from the French, which is, doubtless, even in our uncertain climate, no trifling improvement. Nevertheless, it has its drawbacks. Three-quarters of a mile of beauty—English beauty, too—looking its best, attired in gorgeous apparel, and drawn up sometimes even three deep, is a glorious sight doubtless, and one calculated to inspire feelings of admiration and enthusiasm not entirely devoid of awe; but to walk composedly from end to end of such an array, is an ordeal that a bashful man may well shudder to undergo. I should scarcely recommend an Englishman to attempt it; and to do them justice, I have remarked that my countrymen seldom venture to run the gauntlet unsupported and alone. Damon meets Pythias, and hooks him by the arm ere he commences the promenade. Thus encouraged, he crosses the line of fire leisurely and coolly enough; but if the latter should be suddenly seized with a fit, or otherwise incapacitated, Damon becomes in-

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stantly conscious of a total disorganisation of his outward man. It seems that his clothes don't fit him, that his boots look too large and feel too small ; that his hat is too tight, his gloves too loose ; and that there is something irresistibly ludicrous in the expression of his profile. His only course is to dash at an empty chair, pay his penny, and join the ranks of the aggressors on the spot, till he can prevail on another friend to take pity on him and tow him off. A Crimean officer, who was present at the attack on the Redan, has assured me that he would rather encounter the fire that swept that deadly *glacis* over again, than walk *solus* on a summer's afternoon up the right-hand side of Rotten Row, from Apsley House to the Serpentine.

The costume, too, of gentlemen and ladies has undergone some mutations since the first fine day that our Achilles found himself standing on his bare legs in the Corner. There are no high neckcloths, there are no blue-tail coats, alas ! there are no Hessian boots now. D'Orsay has followed Brummel where dress is unnecessary, perhaps inconvenient, and a garment that fitted a man would be pointed at in the present day as simply ridiculous. Our youths are clothed to please themselves, and so, I presume, are the ladies. That an outer fabric of light material, standing several feet from the person on all sides, is a cool and comfortable attire in warm weather, appears a self-evident proposition ; but that the beauty of the female figure is enhanced by this up-springing, so to speak, like a jack-in-the-box, out of a volume of circum-ambient muslin, is a question of opinion which may admit of some dispute. Who shall decide on such matters ? Achilles must congratulate himself that his own proportions are independent of all vagaries of fashion and changes of costume. Above all, if he be wise, should he exult and leap for joy as it were, in the untrammelled luxury of his naked feet. I speak it advisedly when I say that on the most crowded day in June, I believe the Greek alone of all that throng around him is ignorant of the suffering caused by a pair of tight boots. Now, I am aware that in this department of art, as in many others, we have borrowed largely from the French. I am not to be told that Hoby and Hubert and the rest have achieved all that can be achieved with so pliant a material as leather, and that even the cunning chiropodist who did so much for Louis Napoleon, finds his profession failing him day by day, for that there are no excrescences now to pare away. So when I speak of tight boots, be it understood that I speak metaphorically ; that I allude to the moral pinching of the

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shoe, which the proverb says is best known to him who wears it—to that torture of the inner man which all the easings and stretchings of all the cobblers and cordwainers who do homage to St. Crispin are powerless to assuage.

Let us take, at random, the three or four men encountered by John Gordon as he turns into the Park after dropping his missive at a Piccadilly post-office; and first, it is worth while to scan the pace and action of John himself. His footfall on the pavement is firm, light, and regular, the tread of a man whom fencing, running, leaping, and such athletic exercises have put well upon his legs; his polished boots look cool, easy, and comfortable; his demeanour preserves its usual confidence and assurance; his expression, though habitually grave, is that of one with whom all is well within and without. Pelides, in his bronze, could not look more imperturbable and self-reliant. But is it so? By no means. John's boots are to-day a good deal tighter than usual. Certain shares which he holds on his own account, and in the selection of which he flattered himself he had shown more than common perspicuity, were this morning at a considerable discount in the City. The business of which he is principal manager has got into a hitch, and advices received by to-day's post have tended to complicate the difficulty. Also an outstanding claim he had resolved, with the concurrence of his partner, to contest, has been advanced at an inconvenient season, and in an offensive manner. Some of the irons in John's fire have thus become unpleasantly warm to the touch, and he feels to-day further removed than usual from the coming independence, and power, and influence which are to rest upon *£ s. d.* Thus it occurs to him as Lady Olivia's barouche turns into the Ring, that it will be ten years at least before he can dream of marrying. John is not a bread-and-butter, love-in-a-cottage sort of man. He is not young enough to be romantic, and too young to know the real value of gold—alas! far below the price we see it quoted in the daily papers as commanding at Hamburg—so he dismisses the subject at once with his customary energy, but feels, notwithstanding, that his mental perambulations into the future limp along very restrictedly in consequence. No—John Gordon's boots are to-day by no means pleasant to wear.

Lord Holyhead, Charley Wing, and old Landless lounge in leisurely conclave at the rails, and the nobleman, who is on horseback, recognises Gordon, and nods to him over the heads of his two friends. With Holyhead's strong, firm seat in the saddle, surely there can be no pressure on the soles,

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and those feet, thrust home in their shining stirrup-irons, ought indeed to be unconscious of a twinge. Alas! "Nobs," like his neighbours, is undergoing the torture of the boot. In the first place, he is on a certain hack of which he has long coveted the possession, and is to-day for the first time proving the merits of his late acquisition. The animal is faultless in appearance, symmetrical, and well-bred. In the stable it comes near perfection, but ere he had ridden it a hundred yards this afternoon, he discovered the old story, that, if he had only been on its back before he bought it, he would not have given half the money it had cost him for his purchase. Old Landless, too, who is a first-rate judge, has not improved the matter by volunteering his opinion that "It's a clever-shaped one enough, but as a hack, Holyhead, I don't think it *quite* comes up to your mark!"

Twinge number one!

Then he has had what he calls a roughish time of it lately with Bravoura, and has resolved that his acquaintance with that siren shall henceforth become day by day more distant. To any gentleman who has taken in hand the very difficult task of breaking with a lady whose interests, rather than her inclinations, lead her to value his friendship, it is needless to insist on the oft-recurring annoyances created by this twinge number two!

Lastly, by to-day's post he has heard from his steward in the north, that the poacher whom he directed him to prosecute, and who had hitherto been a prime favourite with his lordship, and the best cricketer in the parish, has been pitched into by the worthy magistrates far more severely than he desired, or than the culprit deserved; and to do Holyhead justice (for, as his old brother-officers well know, Nobs always had his heart in the right place), this last twinge is considerably keener than either of those created by the deception of a dealer and the caprices of a *contralto*.

Landless, who has one arm linked in Charley Wing's, and the other reclining on the rails, might indeed fairly claim immunity from all mental pangs, such as I have described, on the score of bodily suffering. A generous champagne-and-claret gout has reduced him to a crippled amble, and a pair of cloth shoes, even at the best of times; and why he should ever have a care or an anxiety it is difficult to understand, living, as he does, on a small annuity wrung from the forbearance of his creditors. The Yorkshire property is mortgaged, the Irish estates are under trust. As fine a fortune as was ever wasted has been frittered away, less

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through vice than sheer carelessness and incompetency, so that none but the lawyers know where it is all gone; and the former Amphitryon of many a joyous feast and hospitable welcome, is satisfied now to dine for seven-and-sixpence at his club, and prose away the evening over his brandy-and-water and cigar. I believe Landless likes his present quite as well as his former life. Easy, good-tempered, without brains or ambition, the necessities of his existence are but a little whist, a little lounging, much gossip and tittle-tattle (for Landless is kindly even in his weaknesses, and stops short of scandal), a glass of warm negus after he is in bed, and an old servant who robbed him handsomely in former days, and saves every shilling he can for him now, to look after him. It seems he should have no more cares nor anxieties than an ox stalled up to feed; and yet—and yet—within that bloated form there does beat a heart, if you can only get at it, and, next that heart, in his breast-pocket lies a yellow, fumigated ship-letter that makes every pulsation beneath it a throb of pain. Even Landless loves one thing on earth besides his dinner, and if that curly-headed midshipman, lying sick unto death at the mouth of the Senegal, yield to the fever which is wasting his fair young frame, the old reprobate will wail for him like a very Rachel, and refuse to be comforted. Yes, he loves his boy—the boy who could never be his heir. Out of all he has squandered, he might, perhaps, have made a better provision for his treasure than a midshipman's berth in a ten-gun brig. And yet he has always loved him, as a rosy laughing urchin whom he visited by stealth, and who was never taught to call him "papa"; as a bold frank-eyed boy at the Charter House; as a comely stripling in his gold-laced cap, at the George Hotel, Portsmouth, before he sailed; never perhaps as well as now, when, for aught he knows, the lad may be sleeping forty fathom deep beneath that swelling sea. So, as Landless shifts uneasily from one gouty foot to the other in the flesh, he is walking blindfold over red-hot ploughshares in the spirit, and his battered old heart turns sick within him lest he should never see his darling again.

As for Charley Wing's boots, tiny and astonishing as are those unequalled specimens, they are but a pair of easy slippers compared with the mental *chaussure* into which his inner man has put its foot. Like the shirt of Nessus, the latter has raised one continuous blister over his whole moral epidermis. Charley's debts and difficulties have reached a climax at which, as he himself says, "man ceases to be a

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free agent, and is absolved from all responsibility in the great scheme." Not only is the coat he wears unpaid for, but the most long-suffering of tailors has declined to present him with another. Not only is he in debt to everybody whom he honours with his acquaintance, but the shillings and half-crowns are beginning to run short, and he has more than once of late expressed a wish that the noble system of credit could be extended to our cab-stands. He is engaged to-day to dine with a duke (not Duke H.), but he thinks it extremely probable that he may be arrested in his progress across the pavement between the marquis's brougham that drops him, and the arms of the parti-coloured giant who will relieve him of his overcoat. Already he is acquiring the knack of glancing over his shoulder, which is never practised save by him who expects an admonitory tap thereon. Already he accepts invitations and makes engagements with a devout air, as of one who is conscious of the uncertainty of human affairs, and jests somewhat plaintively on his probable incarceration, as a mortal may who is prepared to submit resignedly to the common lot. But he is pleasant and *nonchalant* just the same; quizzing old Landless placidly, and discussing the points of Holyhead's hack as unconcernedly as if he could buy up the national debt. These young men of pleasure lavish a good many valuable qualities on a sadly unworthy object. I cannot but admire constancy, endurance, and a stoical good-humour equal to either fortune, even though they be wasted on so foolish and objectless a career as a round of London dissipation; and these Charley Wing must have possessed, or he never could have borne his reverses so composedly. There was a Spartan's pluck under all that "Persian apparatus" outside, and had his boots been as tight as Cinderella's slippers, he would have scorned to go lame in them for a yard.

As Gordon joins the trio, Gilbert Orme appears, picking his way daintily across the Ride, nodding to a dandy here, and bowing to an equestrian beauty there, with considerably more energy than is habitual to him. Whatever twinges may be in store for Gilbert, to-day he is treading upon air. He is in the first stage of a malady which is fatal to some constitutions, and a general light-headedness is the result. He sees the world through rose-coloured spectacles, if, indeed, such are to be procured at any real optician's. The motley of the kaleidoscope is to him invested with a magic glamour, and Pelides towers above him in a halo of artificial glory. Why is the grass so fresh to-day as it waves in the summer wind?

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Why are the leaves such a golden green as they flicker against the summer sky? Why is that vista of forest-glade towards Kensington no longer a mere *lobe*, or breathing-place of the great metropolis, but a glimpse into Fairyland? Because he has crossed the tiny stream that scarcely wets the wayfarer's feet, and taken his first step into the enchanted region. Fair is the path, and pleasant too, at starting, and all downhill. The breeze is heavy with perfumes, and his tread is upon crushed roses, innocent, it would seem, of thorns. We shall see. Steeper and steeper slopes the hill. By and by, flints cut the tender soles, and there are no flowers in the brake through which he must force his way, but plenty of thorns here that pierce him to the quick. Faster and faster he must on. The very nature of the spell forbids him to retrace his steps, and he cannot turn aside, for the enchanted country spreads wider and wider around, though it is lone and dreary now, and he shudders to think that if he leave the path he must be lost in the cheerless desert. He cannot stop, for the descent is steeper yet, and he must plunge on ankle deep in sand and shingle, faint, weary, and athirst, down, down, through the gathering darkness, wherever the path shall lead him, even to the waters of the Dead Sea. Woe betide him then! falling prostrate in his hot need to lip the wave. Woe betide him! that he must perish at last in an agony of thirst, though steeped to the very nostrils in the mocking flood.

Mrs. Montpellier had found him out directly. Women are so sharp. The yellow barouche was drawn up according to custom, where carriages most congregate, and Gilbert had been to pay his respects to the lively widow. As she watched his shapely figure winding its way through the crowd, she smiled to herself, while she thought with generous triumph, "one of my sex has succeeded in taming wild Gilbert Orme at last. I wonder which of us it is?"

Holyhead attacked him directly he joined the party.

"I saw the yellow barouche, Gilbert," said he. "I knew you couldn't be far off. Do you dine at the Ringdoves to-day to meet her? It's a regular case."

Gilbert only laughed. He was always impervious to quizzing, and more so now than usual. With an imperceptible glance at Landless's swollen feet, he took John by the arm and led him off for a stroll up the walk, leaving the gouty sufferer to continue his conversation with his companions.

"Is he really going to marry Mrs. Montpellier?" asked

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Charley Wing, with a faint glimmering that now he was no longer a free agent he had better have done so himself.

"I should hope not," observed Landless. "Why, she's old enough to be his mother, and a de—vil of a temper besides!"

"I don't believe that," interrupted Holyhead, who never would let anyone be run down. "I don't believe there's a better woman in London."

"Fact, though, for all that," was the answer. "I knew her first husband when he was in the 190th. She used to lock him out of their house whenever he sat too late in the mess-room at Plymouth; and as he was always rather given to brandy-and-water, I fancy, poor fellow, he seldom spent a night in his own bed; and she was only eighteen then. What she would do now at eight-and-thirty I should be sorry to contemplate. Perhaps she'd never let him off duty at all. Eh, Charley! that would be a pretty go—wouldn't it?"

There was no arguing with old Landless when he got back to his recollections, which, from his antiquity, extended into a remote period far beyond the experience of his companions. Holyhead, therefore, had no resource but to canter off with a snort of disapproval; and Charley Wing lounged away in search of a chair, having discovered, to his surprise, that he was able to pay for it. So the old gentleman was left alone in his glory, and the ship-letter, which, indeed, had never been absent from his mind, came before it more painfully than ever.

Gilbert and John strolled leisurely up the Park, halting every hundred yards to lean against the rails and chat with the mounted throng. Many a fair head bowed gracefully beneath its wide-awake hat to Gilbert's ready salute; many a taper hand drew the rein a thought tighter, or lavished a dainty caress on the smooth arch neck before it, in order to pass Mr. Orme in the most becoming manner; and portly papas, jogging alongside these enterprising Amazons, observed, "He's a nice young fellow that, Bessie; don't let mamma forget to ask him to dine with us on Wednesday!"

Be sure Bessie remembered, and mamma didn't forget, for the latter had "always heard Mr. Orme must have ten thousand a year." By the way, are there no fortunes in England between "Nothing," "Comfortably off," "Ten thousand a year," and a "Millionaire"? Perhaps the Income-tax Commissioners could tell. For my part, I have never heard of one.

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If I wanted to impress a foreigner with the merits of English society, I would take him up this very walk on such a crowded sunshiny afternoon. Our compatriots show to the greatest advantage out of doors; and no woman alive looks so well in a riding-habit as the Anglo-Saxon. There is no such lounge anywhere else in Europe. The Prater at Vienna is a deserted solitude in comparison; and the concourse in the Bois de Boulogne reminds me of a pantomime, without the music, that gives life to that fanciful representation. But Rotten Row, which unsavoury name antiquarians affirm to be derived from the *Route du Roi*, is an institution *per se*, and challenges attention accordingly.

Gilbert and his companion turned at the Serpentine after another hearty stare into the horse-road, and proceeded to retrace their steps at the same leisurely rate, but with fewer stoppages. The Park was thinning rapidly; and the bevy of beauty had fled from its *parterre* as the ducks do from a disturbed decoy. Only a few of the boldest were left, such, indeed, as had nothing to fear from the stratagems of the fowler. Sleepy hacks—and what steed is so mettled but that he does get sleepy in London?—were roused for their final canter, and flitting forms were fast disappearing through the many egresses of the Park.

John had just pulled out his watch with a smothered yawn, and voted it time to dress for dinner, when he was startled by a sudden wrench of his friend's arm from his own that well-nigh spun the Geneva out of his hand, accompanied by an exclamation of profane vehemence and indubitable surprise. Ere he had recovered his equanimity, Gilbert was a hundred yards off, striding away at the rate of six miles an hour in pursuit of a female figure carrying a roll of music in her hand, who was herself making such good way as argued no mean pedestrian powers.

John gave vent to a prolonged whistle; such a whistle as is the male rendering of a woman's "Well, I never!" and pocketing his watch, pursued his walk with a comical expression of pity about his mouth. Gilbert meanwhile was coming up rapidly with the chase, and his self-possession was failing him in proportion. There was no mistaking her. Tastefully but quietly dressed, as one who would avoid observation, her veil drawn over her face, and her head rather bent down as she scudded along at a pace such as only feet and ankles like Ada's can command. There was no doubt in Gilbert's mind that it could be none other than Mrs. Latimer. What to say to her? How to account for his intrusion? He was breath-

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less when he came alongside ; and yet Gilbert could breast a Highland mountain, and whistle a Jacobite air without a false note the while.

He doffed his hat with the greatest diffidence. She did not offer to shake hands with him, but bowed rather distantly in return. Then he "hoped Mrs. Latimer was quite well. Had she seen Miss Jones since they met at the Villa? What a pretty villa it was!"

Mrs. Latimer "had seen Miss Jones yesterday, and it *was* a pretty villa."

Rather a dead lock than otherwise. Both their hearts were beating very fast, and they were walking a liberal four miles an hour.

"I am going home across the Park," stammered the gentleman (and perhaps if the longest way round be indeed the shortest way home he had chosen a judicious route for Green Street). "Pray allow me to carry that—that—*parcel* for you;" emphasising the substantive as though it had been a clothes-basket.

"Thank you ; it's not very heavy," she said, repressing a smile. Nor was it, indeed, being but a single sheet of music. He would have liked it to weigh a ton, though, in that case, she would probably have returned with it in a waggon. She almost wished she had! Ada was getting frightened ; yet was she provoked with herself too. It seemed absurd that she should make difficulties about walking a couple of hundred yards with an acquaintance! After all, he had been regularly introduced to her, and she was old enough to take care of herself ; so she summoned up courage to thank him again, and told him she had been giving a singing-lesson down in Belgravia to a new pupil, and mentioned the acolyte's name, insisting somewhat unnecessarily on her profession, and flourishing it, so to speak, in her companion's face, though she would have been puzzled to explain why she did so. All this was lost upon Gilbert.

"My cousin Gertrude!" he exclaimed in a rapture ; "do you teach Gertrude? I am so glad you know her! don't you like her very much? Then that is the reason she left the Park so early to-day. I always thought she had a good voice. Will she sing well? I am sure she will if *you* try to make her. I hope she won't sing that song about the angel, though."

"Why not? don't you like it?" she asked ; and a moment afterwards she rebuked herself for the question.

"Like it!" he exclaimed ; "I hope the angels will sing it

me when I am dying. Like it! I have never been able to get it out of my head. I hum it all day, and dream of it all night; and yet, do you know, I don't think I should like to hear it sung by anybody again who—who couldn't do justice to it," he concluded rather lamely.

She thought it best to try back upon the cousin.

"I gave Lady Gertrude her first lesson to-day," she resumed. "I think she is a very promising pupil. I shall take great pains with her. I—didn't know she was your cousin," she was going to say, but she stopped herself just in time.

"How fond you must be of music," he interposed, not caring to discuss Gertrude's merits just then. "What a pleasure it must be to call up such feelings in your listeners, and to make fools of them at your will! Music and mesmerism always seem to me the powers I should covet most to possess. It is a gratifying thing to command the bodies of one's fellow-creatures, but what a triumph it must be to know that one can sway their minds. Don't you feel like an empress, Mrs. Latimer, when hundreds are hanging on every word that comes from your lips?"

"Indeed I don't," she replied, simply and frankly enough. "At first I used to be frightened out of my wits, and even now I'm always glad when a concert or anything of that kind is over. If I was rich I should never sing in public; and yet I dearly love music, too, for its own sake."

"Of course you do!" he exclaimed enthusiastically; "what would I give to possess the charm that you do, and which you seem to value so lightly. To elevate the minds of so many above their everyday vulgar cares and distresses, and to bring back to them, as you can, if only for five minutes, the holiest and happiest period of their lives. It is no slight thing, Mrs. Latimer, to influence any one human being, as that song of yours has influenced me, ever since the first time I heard it at the concert."

Gilbert had got into his swing now, and was striding away like a winning horse over all obstacles. What more high-flown opinions he might have broached it is impossible to guess, for at this juncture he was brought to a halt by the Edgware Road—a thoroughfare which his companion had resolved from the first was to prove a barrier between them, impassable as the Styx.

Arrived at its fatal brink, she stopped short, and took leave of him gracefully and kindly enough, but with an air that told him plainly he would not be suffered to attend her

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a yard farther on her journey. To do him justice, he obeyed the implied behest without a murmur. They shook hands, though, and lingered both of them for half a second over the ceremony that concluded what each felt had been a very charming walk—

“Good-bye, Mrs. Latimer!”

“Good-bye, Mr. Orme!”

Gilbert never thought his own name so pretty, as when he heard it spoken in these soft, gentle tones.

How late he was for dinner that day at his great-uncle the bishop's; how absent all the evening; how glad when it was over! The opium-eater has but little appetite for natural food. The richest draught is flat and tasteless to him who grasps that cup of which the first sip is nectar, poisoned though it be! The prelate's guests sat down to the episcopal good cheer thankfully enough, at eight; but then they hadn't been walking in the Park at half-past seven with a Mrs. Latimer.

And Ada went home and drank her tea, and sat in her solitude thankful to be so near the Park, watching the glowing hues of sunset, as she thought what a beautiful world this was, even in London, and wondering—oh! how she wondered—when she should see him again.

CHAPTER XV

“ AT HOME ”

THERE is a certain rite performed by the upper classes during the hottest part of the London season, of which, to the uninitiated, it would be difficult to explain the advantages or the end. This solemnity, which has been in vogue for a good many years, was called by our grandmothers a rout, whereas modern irreverence, by an equally martial and inexplicable metaphor, designates it a drum! Its chief characteristic seems to be suffocation under certain restrictions, and it would appear to have been originally intended by some rigorous ascetics for the practice of mortification and self-denial, moral as well as physical. The votaries, arriving at as late an hour as possible, sit for a considerable period in their respective vehicles, preparing, as it would seem, in darkness and solitude, for the approaching ordeal, and emerge, under the immediate guidance of a policeman, where awning and foot-cloth are spread to protect the magnificence of their attire. Wedged in considerable masses, the next step is to contest a staircase inch by inch with a throng of ladies and gentlemen all at a high temperature, until by the exercise of patience, forbearance, and no small amount of physical strength, a distant doorway is eventually attained. Here the presiding priestess, enjoying the comparative freedom of breathing-space and elbow-room, stands to receive the homage of her guests; and when a formal bow has been tendered and returned, the whole object of the ceremonials would seem to have been accomplished, and nothing more remains but a second struggle for freedom, open-air, and the friendly light of the carriage-lamps. Recognition, for persons of average altitude, is impracticable. Conversation, beyond begging pardon for crushing, impossible. If friends are jammed against friends, the very juxtaposition forbids colloquial ease; and if ten yards apart, they are as effectually separated as if they were in different streets. The heat is intense, the physical labour considerable. Great lassitude and fatigue are the

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immediate results ; and yet there is, doubtless, some hidden charm, some inexplicable advantage consequent on these gatherings, else how can we account for the eagerness with which they are sought, and the patience with which they are endured ?

Lady Olivia's "at home" was no exception to the general rule ; "the world" said "all the world" was there ; and as "all the world" was likewise at another festivity on the opposite side of the square, much confusion amongst the chariots of the mighty, much strong language, clattering of hoofs, and application of whipcord, was the result.

How Bella's colour rose as the carriage-steps were let down. That little earthenware jug amongst all those vessels of Sèvres and Dresden, and delicate porcelain, how she shrank to her chaperone's side—an ample matron, with daughters of her own ; and whose heart, large as the capacious bosom under which it beat, was always ready to befriend the motherless girl, but who has nothing to do with my story, more's the pity—how she dreaded the coming presentation to Lady Olivia, and winced from the ordeal which she had so teased John Gordon—the little schemer !—to enable her to undergo. She had ample time for preparation, however, and got through the introductory ceremony easily enough, Lady Olivia giving her the coldest of her cold bows, and suffering her to pass on into the room without further notice or welcome. Then Bella was glad to sink into a seat, well sheltered under the protecting wing (for Bella's chaperone, though she knew everybody in London, and was liked in every circle, had not forgotten that she had been a girl herself, and was once as shy as she was slim), and rest content to look about her, and think how few people she knew, and hope John Gordon wouldn't be late, for John had promised to come, and Bella said to herself, with a thrill of secret pride, "what John promises he always performs."

It was dull work, though, for the uninitiated girl to watch the quiet movements of the puppets without knowing who pulled the strings. A fat bald man opposite was talking eagerly in whispers to an elderly lady, decorated with a profusion of diamonds and a flaxen wig. It might have been interesting to her had she been aware that the gentleman was a foreign statesman of eminence, the lady a political *intriguante* of European reputation. Truth, however, compels me to acknowledge that the subject of conversation was not the interpretation of treaties, nor the fate of nations, but the merits of the Vichy waters, and their beneficial effect on the digestive organs.

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Again, she knew Lord Holyhead by sight ; and she did weave a shocking little romance in her own head when she saw a stealthy and most affectionate squeeze of the hand interchanged by his lordship with a remarkably pretty woman, hanging on an elderly husband's arm, accompanied by the softest of glances, and a whispered, " I'm so glad you're come." So she was ! for he ought to have dined with them that day, and she was his chief pet, and favourite of all his sisters. Moreover, she marked the meeting of a couple who seemed to know and yet not to know each other, their recognition was so distant and constrained, their looks so embarrassed and quickly averted. Bella resolved in her own mind that they must be secret enemies, all the more bitter that the forms of society compelled them to reciprocal civility. Had she seen the same pair together at four o'clock that afternoon, she could only have concluded that they must have quarrelled since. Altogether she voted it was rather stupid than otherwise, and began to think that she would be glad when it was time to go home.

But Bella's eye brightened once more as she saw a gentleman winding his way perseveringly through the throng, evidently to come and speak to her. No, it was not John Gordon, but it was his friend, Mr. Orme. Gilbert was unusually dutiful to-night ; he had dined with his great-uncle, and now came to look in before going to bed at his mamma's " at home." When he saw Miss Jones, he started with pleasure, and made for her point-blank. To those who have ever been so foolish as to care for anything but themselves, I need not explain why that young lady's presence should have been such an agreeable surprise. Have you a favourite flower ? is there a colour for ribbons that you prefer ? would you rather walk down one side of a street than another ? If so, you know what association means, and you can understand that the compliment to Bella was the least flattering possible.

" You don't know Gertrude, Miss Jones," said Gilbert, shaking hands with her warmly, and bowing to her chaperone ; " pray let me bring Gertrude to you. My cousin Gertrude ; she belongs to the house, you know. Won't you have some tea ? and, oh ! Miss Jones, how's the parrot ? "

There was something irresistible in Gilbert's cordial manner ; no shyness or reserve could stand before it for an instant. People felt at their ease with him directly. By the time he had found his cousin, and detached her from certain admirers whom she was trampling under foot with her usual dignity, Bella's courage had risen several degrees, and she

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had made up her mind that next to John Gordon, who had not come yet, nobody was so *nice* (that's the word) as Mr. Orme. Like most high-bred young ladies, Gertrude was also perfectly good-natured. The two girls were friends directly.

"You must come and see me in the morning, Miss Jones, and make acquaintance with my snuggery upstairs. I don't call these 'crushes' meeting one's friends. I am so glad, though, that you found your way here to-night. I have heard so much of you from Mr. Gordon."

Bella coloured. Some young ladies blush becomingly, and some do not; Miss Jones was of the latter class. Lady Gertrude scanned her narrowly, and felt she liked her much better than she expected. She sat by her on the ottoman, and they were getting on very well when Gilbert lounged up to them once more; he could not keep away from Miss Jones *pour cause*.

"I have never thanked you for the pleasant evening I spent at your house," said he. "You were not at home when I called. It's the prettiest villa in England, Gertrude, and Miss Jones has got a parrot that you would give your two eyes to possess. He can talk, and sing, and play the piano-forte; can't he, Miss Jones? If you heard him, Gertrude, you'd never look at the canary again."

Bella's eyes sparkled; it was no light triumph to have such a first-rater in tow as this good-looking, dandified Mr. Orme. Forgive her, demure Dorcas! forgive her, ascetic Agatha! she was but a girl still, and you are birds of prey by nature, every one of you, caged though you be. She answered with unnecessary warmth and animation.

"Come again, if you like the Villa so much, Mr. Orme, but come earlier. Papa is often at home at luncheon-time, and I never go out till three, because of my music-lesson."

He coloured to the roots of his hair.

"He should be delighted; it was so kind of them—so hospitable—he should like it of all things; he wanted so much to see the garden—he was so fond of a garden!"

Lady Gertrude looked from one to the other in mute astonishment. Gilbert fond of a garden! this beat everything. Gracious heavens! he must be in love with the girl, this shy, awkward, undeveloped, half-educated miss!

"It's impossible!" thought Gertrude. "It cannot be; it must not be; it *shall* not be!"

But her astonishment was lost upon its object. Outwardly he seemed engrossed in the admiration of a very neat boot. Inwardly he was considering whether to-morrow would be too



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"Come again, if you like the Villa so much
Mr. Orme"

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soon to call again, or the next day; certainly he might call the next day.

“Go and get me an ice, Gilbert,” said her ladyship in her most imperious tones, “and don’t be an hour about it. I want it directly.”

She had a way of ordering him about, when she meant to pet him especially—a pretty petulant way that he quite understood, so she thought; and indeed many a man would have brought her an ice from the North Pole to be so commanded with such a motive. Whilst he executed his mission he was scheming a thousand ways of meeting his tormentor here in this very house, at the Villa, in the Park, whenever and wherever he could get a glimpse of her. His head was in a whirl—he scarcely knew what he was doing. And yet this was a man who could drive an unruly team to an inch in a crowded thoroughfare, who could steer a boat to a nicety in a gale of wind, whose friends believed him to be heartless, *blasé*, impenetrable, and cold as the very ice he handed to his cousin.

Whilst she sipped it she kept him near her. She was especially kind, and perhaps a *little* patronising to Bella, but she had determined to make her feel in a thousand ways that her cousin was her own peculiar property; that the idea of a Miss Jones flying at such high game was simply ridiculous; and that to enter the lists against herself, with all her advantages of person, position, and propinquity, was but to ensure defeat.

Gilbert, in the happiest frame of mind, for reasons of his own, played into her hands unwittingly, and suffered her to appropriate and tyrannise over him with all the satisfaction of a willing captive. Even Lady Olivia scowled at them as she passed; and Bella, who thought it the most natural thing in the world that the cousins should be engaged, treasured up that fact for future comment, and entered into the spirit of the conversation with a good-humoured vivacity that Lady Gertrude thought rather “pushing,” and Gilbert never thought about at all. It was a pretty game enough at blindman’s-buff, and nobody caught.

Bella would have enjoyed it more had it included another player. In the midst of her smiles, she winced every now and then to think John Gordon had broken his promise, and had not come. He who had got her the invitation to this gathering of smart people, who took such an interest in her first plunge into society, who had told her so assuredly he would be there to take care of her if she wanted him, and

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now to forget all about it, and not to come. It was unlike him—it was inconsiderate—it was unkind!

No, Bella, it was none of these. John Gordon attends to business before pleasure. An express from the office reached him at dinner at his club. He has been closeted for hours in that office, poring over accounts by the light of a tallow candle, in company with a dirty man, who looks as if he had just come off a long voyage and a short allowance of fresh water; which is, indeed, the fact. Since then he had been home to dress, and is now jingling here in a hack-cab as fast as that vehicle can bring him.

As Bella sailed downstairs in the wake of her chaperone, John Gordon was coming up, but he turned back to accompany her to the cloak-room, and postponed paying his respects to his hostess and her niece till he should have put her into the carriage, which was even then the next in the string, waiting to take her off. The poor girl looked up reproachfully in his face as he prepared to wrap her up, and held her cloak out with extended arms for the purpose; but in John's usually imperturbable countenance there was a wistful, pitying expression that she could not fathom, yet that she was conscious she had never seen there before. Half frightened, and more than half inclined to cry, she could only get out—

"I thought you were never coming, Mr. Gordon; but thank you for my evening all the same."

"I hope you enjoyed it," was his answer as he put her into the carriage; and again the same pitying expression swept over his features; "Good-night, Bella—God bless you!"

He had never pressed her hand so warmly till to-night; he had never said "God bless you!" to her in her life before. What could it all mean?

The crowd was thinning rapidly, and he made his way upstairs without difficulty. Lady Olivia's reception was, for her, wonderfully gracious, and Gertrude was still monopolising her cousin Gilbert. John Gordon walked up to them with his usual cold and impassive air. Gilbert saw nothing in his friend different from usual; but Lady Gertrude gave one quick searching glance into his face, and put out her hand to him, and pressed his kindly, though she had seen him that afternoon, and moved her dress a little so as to make more room on the ottoman beside her. She would never have allowed it, but somehow to-night she took a greater interest in him than usual. Although he was colder

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and more impassible than she ever remembered him, she would have liked to have had him all to herself in a quiet *tête-à-tête*. She had so many things to ask him and to talk over with him; so she flirted with Gilbert more vigorously than ever, despite Lady Olivia's scowls, and Mr. Gordon's apparent indifference to herself and everything else.

It was no false heraldry that represented the Sphinx as a woman down to the girdle.

CHAPTER XVI

A HITCH IN THE REEL

THE days wore on. The Derby came and passed. People dressed, and dined, and flirted, and wagered and ran in debt, taking what they believed to be their pleasure, broiling on the pavement of Pall Mall, or wet to the skin on the slopes of Ascot; and Gilbert, moving from habit in the accustomed circle, went about it all like a man in a dream. The malady from which he was suffering so far resembles the ague, that its hot and cold fits succeed each other in regular alternation. Gilbert had, at least, two paroxysms of each in the twenty-four hours, and was fast waning into a state of nervous imbecility. He became thoughtful, moody, impatient, and averse to the society of his friends. Holyhead's abrupt opinions and worldly maxims seemed heartless and unfeeling; old Landless was simply a bore, without the advantage of being a well-principled one; and as for Charley Wing—he began to wonder what was the merit, after all, of Charley Wing? He wasn't clever, he wasn't well-informed; and no man professing such a low esteem for women could be either good-hearted or respectable. This was becoming a sore point with Gilbert. In the morning-room at White's, or the gossiping circles of his other clubs, he was liable to hear certain opinions broached from which he winced as from a red-hot iron. Gentlemen of all ages allow themselves considerable latitude in the discussion of topics which, perhaps, are better not discussed at all. By assuming to speak from experience, they would fain infer that they themselves are irresistible; and a man who confines himself to generalities, need never fear reproof or contradiction. For my part, I think Bayard is a better example than Lovelace. I think he whom a woman has trusted, should, for that reason, be the champion, not the accuser, of her sex. I think the braggart who assumes a triumph to which he is not entitled, deserves to meet as summary a fate as the indiscreet intruder in a certain

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Irish fairy-tale; and I join cordially in the enchanted distich—

“Woe worth the coward that ever he was born,
Who did not dare to draw the sword before he blew the horn.”

Poor Gilbert hated the very sight of Flippant now. He wondered he could ever have listened patiently to that be-guiling tongue, or looked without loathing on those hyacin-thine locks, the pride of a coiffeur's art. He said as much to Holyhead one day as they turned out of St. James's Street, and the energetic peer at once avowed his opinion that “Flippant was a d——d old humbug. But, after all, Gilbert, my boy, women are very much alike!” And then he fell to talking of Bravoura. Of Bravoura! and Gilbert's type all the time was Ada Latimer.

He had now but one object in the day, or rather one in every two days. This was his walk across the Park with his enslaver. Three times a week for ten minutes he could converse with Mrs. Latimer. Thirty minutes a week, or two hours in a month. At this rate he could enjoy her society for one day in every calendar year; or about six weeks of his whole remaining life, supposing he lived to seventy. And for this he was content to barter comfort, liberty, friends, ambition, everything he had in the world, and hug himself on the exchange. Surely “value received” is but a relative term, incapable of accurate measurement or calculation.

This was one of Gilbert's *white* days. A late breakfast to shorten the time as much as possible; a restless stroll out of doors to survey his ground, as it were, and enjoy by anticipation the delights of his afternoon; a total neglect of all business and duties, and a great disinclination for society; then an elaborate toilet as the afternoon drew on, which, unfortunately, with a well-made, good-looking subject, who, moreover, always looked like a gentleman, could not be spun out to any great length; afterwards an early appearance to share the solitude of the Park with the son of Peleus, which was unnecessary as it was wearisome, inasmuch as she never came till nearly seven o'clock, to be followed by two long nervous hours of suspense and anxiety, avoiding his friends, and unconsciously cutting his acquaintance. He used to think the clock at the corner *must* have stopped, so provok-ingly slow was the progress of that shining minute-hand. What misgivings, too, lest she should not pass after all! She might be ill—she might be gone out of town—she might be anything that was most unlikely. He would bear the sus-

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pense no longer. This should be the last time. To-day he would tell her, come what might, and put a stop to it one way or the other. Yes; no woman alive should make a fool of him beyond a certain point. At last! There she was. God bless her! To-day he would certainly tell her!

But he didn't tell her, nevertheless, for she never gave him an opportunity, because she loved him; and he never made one for the same reason.

For forty minutes or so after the walk he was soothed and calm and tolerably comfortable. Then the reaction began again; and the worry and fidget to last for another seven-and-forty hours.

These were the *white* days. The *black* ones were ditto repeated, without the intervening period of delight. They passed very slowly; and he was glad when they were over. Yet am I not sure that they were the most uncomfortable after all.

"Now, it may seem strange that a gentleman of Mr. Orme's standing and experience should have found such difficulty in obtaining a *tête-à-tête* with the lady of his affections, who was, moreover, her own mistress; and I am not prepared to say that Gilbert did not know perfectly well where she resided, although, with intuitive delicacy, he had never asked the question of herself, else where would be the use of those functionaries in white hats and red waistcoats, who, with singular attention to "the unities," adopt the very colours of the Post Office Directory and Court Guide! Indeed, he had walked past the house many a night when the moon was up, and Ada fast asleep; but he had never ventured to call upon her, as he would have done long ere this had she been a duchess; nor had he ever intruded on the music-lessons in Belgrave Square or the Villa, though often sorely tempted at both. This backwardness explains itself at once to those who know by experience the thoughtfulness and consideration of true affection, though to the Flippant school it would seem an inexcusable waste of time. That "faint heart never won fair lady," may be as true as any other proverb, but the stouter the heart the fainter it is likely to prove in any aggression on the feelings of her it really loves. So Gilbert contented himself perforce with his alternate afternoons, and longed and pondered and resolved to take some decisive measures—and didn't.

At last one dull afternoon, when the Park was nearly empty from the combined influence of a fête at Chiswick and a drizzling rain, there was no Mrs. Latimer.

Gilbert bounced about, and made himself very hot and

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angry, and at last resigned himself to the fact, after he had waited till eight o'clock and was wet to the skin, attributing it to the weather, which he cursed with improper energy, and wishing he could annihilate the intervening period that must elapse before he could see her again. Two days afterwards he was at his post half an hour earlier than usual. It was a bright hot afternoon, and all London seemed to have congregated about the Serpentine. Still, no Mrs. Latimer! That day he waited till dark, and went to bed without any dinner, in a frame of mind by no means enviable or edifying. What could it mean? She must have done it on purpose. Heartless! fickle! unfeeling! No; he would not blame her. He would give her one more chance. He would wait for two days, and then it would be a week, a whole week, since he had seen her. If she didn't come then he would — *what* would he do? He was fain to postpone the contemplation of such a contingency. So he chafed and fretted and waited a whole week; and still she didn't come.

Ada, too, had in the meantime been living a strange, unsettled life of alternate hopes and misgivings, dashed with no inconsiderable twinges of uncertainty and self-reproach. Yet through the motley web there ran one golden thread of secret joy, which she prized the more that it seemed impossible to disentangle it from the hopeless confusion through which it twined. Womanlike, she concealed her feelings even from herself, satisfied, and more than satisfied, with her modicum of present happiness. She dwelt far more than she was aware on the cherished walks, and looked back on them, and forward to them, with an engrossing interest that sufficiently filled up the intervening hours. Resolutely refusing to look into the future, she had not courage to ask herself one or two questions, which she had a vague suspicion were of some importance to her welfare, till they were at last forced upon her unexpectedly, and could be put off no longer.

It was one of the white days, and Mrs. Latimer was at luncheon in the Villa, previous to Miss Jones's music-lesson. Bella being late as usual—for she was as unpunctual as she was good-natured—insisted on her teacher sitting down with her to roast-chicken when they ought to have been murdering a duet. They were quite alone, with the exception of a butler, footman, and page-boy, and discoursed freely as if those domestics were both deaf and dumb. Bella was full of her evening in Belgrave Square, and loud in praise of Lady Gertrude, how she looked, what she had on, all about her. Mrs. Latimer felt she was treading upon dangerous ground; but she,

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too, had some acquaintance with Lady Gertrude; and there was a certain fascination in the subject that led her on against her will.

"She is very handsome," said Mrs. Latimer, thinking of a certain family likeness which no one else could have traced, "and very clever, and altogether a very charming girl."

"That she is!" exclaimed enthusiastic Bella. "Now, if I had been a gentleman, I should have fallen in love with her too directly, and married her at St. George's, all in order, the first week in August. (Some more chicken, dear? Let me give you the merry-thought.) I declare I think Mr. Orme is a very lucky man."

"Why so?" gasped Ada, turning as white as a sheet, and pushing her plate away.

"Oh! don't you know?" replied Bella, still intent upon the chicken; "they say he's engaged to her; and I'm sure the other night nothing could be more attentive. He's very nice, too. You met him here once, and sat next him at dinner. Don't you remember?"

Remember! Poor Ada! Luckily her companion was still so engrossed with the merry-thought, that she did not remark how paler and paler grew the music-mistress's cheek; but the observant butler, who held stoutly by his master's opinion that there is nothing like old sherry, filled her glass by stealth to the brim.

How the music-lesson went on after this, Ada knew no more than I do. Fortunately for her, a strong leavening of indignation, amongst her other feelings, prevented her giving way. "Then he was engaged to be married all the time," thought she—and if she was pale before, her cheeks burned with fiery blushes now—"all the time he professed to be so glad to see me. And I—fool that I was!—meeting him, and watching for him, and longing so to see him. What must he think of me? What must he have thought of me all along?" She would have liked to hide herself for a year. She was more angry with herself than with him. She was hurt, and sick at heart.

But she must go through her lessons. From the Regent's Park to Bayswater, from Bayswater to Knightsbridge, from Knightsbridge to Belgrave Square. There is no respite for the bees, and herein they sting themselves less poignantly with their sorrows than do the idler drones. Ere she sat down to the pianoforte with Lady Gertrude, she began to think it might not be true. Women read other women easily enough, and the young lady's manner was scarcely that of a

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fiancée. Where was the dreamy look, the unconscious smile, the atmosphere of happiness, that diffuses itself around those who have attained their goal? Lady Gertrude was quick, lively, energetic as usual; completely engrossed with her lesson, somewhat sarcastic also, and not the least in the world like a maiden pondering on her absent lover. Probably the whole report was but one of the idle rumours of the world. It made her cross-examine herself, though, pretty searchingly, the while her pupil warbled a *cavatina*, making two mistakes and a false note undetected; and she came to the conclusion that at least the walks must be discontinued from henceforth; she must break herself of this folly, for her own sake—for his sake; ah! then it would be easier; and so, no more sunshine for her, but the old gloomy life, darker than ever it had been before. It seemed hard—very hard. She would have liked to put her head in her hands, and cry till she got better. Lady Gertrude was singing false and unrebuked. A figure footman walked up to the pianoforte with a note—

“Mr. Orme’s servant waiting for an answer, my lady.”

Again the cold, sick feeling crept round Ada’s heart. Her pupil stopped singing, read the missive, and flung it aside with the careless observation, “No answer.” As it rested on the music-stand, Mrs. Latimer could not avoid seeing his handwriting on the half-turned page; it began—“Dearest Gertrude.”

This was the reason the walks were discontinued; and Gilbert driven to such a pitch of monomania as I am powerless to describe.

It is not to be supposed that he sat quietly down under his privation. Would she have liked him better if he had? No; he called boldly at her lodgings; when I say boldly, I mean that he concealed his trepidation (which is, after all, the true definition of courage), and confronted a maid-of-all-work with as much *sang froid* as he could muster. “Mrs. Latimer was not at home,” of course! “When would she be at home?” equally of course, “It was very uncertain.” The maid-of-all-work, in furnishing her report, stated that “the gentleman seemed quite disappointed-like;” and my lady readers will best understand—the confidence which Ada gathered from such an announcement, and the encouragement it gave her to proceed in that thorny path which, because it entailed a painful amount of self-sacrifice, she was persuaded must be the right one; “pleasant, but wrong,” and its converse, seem to comprise the standard by which women regulate their duties and their relaxations.

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Then he tried the Villa, and found himself let in for a heavy luncheon *tête-à-tête* with the alderman, and narrowly escaped a drive back into London with Bella in the sociable. Also he called in Belgrave Square about the accustomed hour of the music-lesson; and had not been there five minutes before Gertrude complained that her mistress had got a cold, and had written to postpone any further tuition *sine die*. Gilbert was at his wits' end. It was poor consolation to walk under her windows at midnight, but he did it, notwithstanding; and she, lying wide awake, and thinking how difficult it was to be good, heard his footfall on the pavement, and never doubted but it was the policeman!

I have seen a dog sit up and beg at a closed door. I have seen a dog kicked and beaten for following its master. I have wondered at that canine instinct of fidelity which accompanies true courage and singleness of heart, and I have been sorry for the dog. Would Ada have been pleased to know that the man who loved her was watching for hours under the gas-lamps only to be near her? would she have loved him better, or prized his devotion the less to be so secure of it? I do not know women well enough to give an answer. I only know what he thought of her—the best, the purest, the noblest of God's creation; he could have bowed the knee to anything in the shape of a woman for her dear sake.

Pacing up and down, absorbed in this rational admiration of a closed shutter, he was the only passenger in the quiet street save one. Alas! for the ghostly figure that flitted round the corner in its dingy garments, and leered at him with dull, faded eye, and stretched a wan, dirty hand for alms, and accosted him in the hollow whisper that tells of sore trouble, and want, and weakness, and gin. You meet them every night, gentlemen. Every night of your lives, as you walk home along the echoing streets, from your clubs or other resorts, from wine, and friendship, and fascination, and merry-making—home to the comfortable house, to the luxurious dressing-room next door to that sacred chamber where nestles the loved one, flushed and warm amidst her delicate white draperies, restless even in her sleep because you tarry long. Think of her whose only refuge is the gin-palace, whose daily bread is the degradation of the streets. For God's dear sake have pity on her! She was not always bad; she is not all bad now. You, too, have been in temptation; have you resisted it? You, too, have sinned; have you been punished as you deserved? Must this poor scapegoat bear the enormities of a whole people; and is yours the hand to drive her out

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into the wilderness, lost and lonely, and shut the gate of the fold against her for ever? The deeper she has sunk, the more need has she of help. The virtuous have heaven and earth, too, on their side; but if all were good, Mount Calvary had been but a nameless hill to this day. You, too, must needs beg for mercy ere long. Hold! this is but a selfish consideration. Think of what One would have done had He been on earth. Is the gospel a romance? or is it true that He said, "Go thou, and do likewise"?

There was five minutes' conversation between Gilbert and the hapless, abandoned wayfarer. A policeman, walking his beat, scanned the couple searchingly, and passed on. Ere he turned the corner, Gilbert had wished her a kindly good-night. The poor woman couldn't speak for sobbing.

"It's not for the money," gasped she, taking the glove out of his hand, and kissing it; "it's not for the money, but the good words, the first I've heard this six months. God bless your kind heart! If every gentleman was like you, I wouldn't be what I am this night! So help me Him that made me, but I'll take your advice and try!"

It is rather a waste of time to lounge about under the windows of your ladye-love, more particularly at midnight, and in an east wind. On this occasion, however, Gilbert went to bed at two a.m., not entirely dissatisfied with the result of his walk.

CHAPTER XVII

AY DE MI!



"HEIGH-HO!" sighed the parrot, coming down the inside of his cage backwards, like a sailor descending the rigging of a ship, holding on with beak and claws the while. "Heigh-ho!" repeated the bird; and the sigh was so like Bella's, that Alderman Jones turned round, startled to find that he was alone in the room.

"The devil's in the bird," quoth the alderman testily, going back to the money article in the *Times*.

"Dear, dear, Consols down again, and Slopes failed in Philadelphia for two hundred thousand dollars! I've a good mind to ring his neck,"—meaning the parrot's not Slopes', whose failure, though it struck Jones and Co. a pretty smart blow, had not been entirely unexpected or unprovided for.

"I'd be a butterfly," sang the parrot in discordant and unearthly notes, "born in a" —, and he cut the tune short with another sigh that set the alderman a-thinking.

It was a new trick this, and he had caught it from Bella. Yes, now that he came to think of it, Bella was always sighing of late. What could be the matter with the girl? Surely she must have got all she wanted. Surely she didn't know anything about these hideous rents and fissures in the business. Surely she couldn't suspect; and yet, if he didn't weather the storm (and things were looking very bad just at present; neither he nor John saw their way very clearly ahead), if he couldn't weather the storm, Bella must be told at last. The alderman pushed away his untasted plate, and took a great gulp of his strong green tea.

The windows were open, and the birds singing blithely out of doors, the sunshine flickering cheerily through the

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green Venetian blinds. There were fresh flowers in the room, and glittering plate and delicate china on the breakfast-table. Must it all go—the fruit of how many years of calculation and energy and honest mercantile enterprise? It would be hard to begin life again now. The alderman glanced at a portrait that hung over against his seat. “My own,” he said, half aloud, “I never thought to be glad that you were at rest in your grave out yonder;” and even while he spoke a tear came to his eye, and his heart thrilled to feel that, old, fat, worn-out as he was, he would have worked thankfully, like the veriest helot, for his daily bread, only to clasp that lady’s hand in his own once more. The parrot sighed again profoundly, and Bella came down to breakfast, bright and comely from her toilet, and gave her old father his morning kiss, with a pleasant smile.

He put the paper down, and half resolved to make his daughter the confidante of his difficulties; but then John Gordon was to be with him at twelve o’clock, for a twinge of his old enemy, the gout, had confined him to the house, and it would be better, he thought, at anyrate, to wait till he had seen his partner, and taken his opinion on the matter. Bella, too, who had discovered (as people do find out other people’s movements) that Mr. Gordon was coming, had resolved to ask him privately, on her own account, why papa was so anxious and ill at ease. John Gordon had great influence, you see, with the whole family at the Villa.

Breakfast progressed uncomfortably. The parrot heaved a succession of deep sighs, after each of which the alderman started and looked searchingly at Bella, who poured out the tea with an absent and preoccupied air, which seemed to justify papa’s suspicions that she was not altogether fancy free. It seems to me one of the hardest lessons that has to be learned in life, thus to conceal from one nearest and dearest those vital matters of which our thoughts are full; to talk perforce of the cook or the carpet, when the question is really whether we shall to-morrow have a roof over our heads or bread to eat; to discuss yesterday’s dinner or last night’s farce, while there is a tragedy enacting in our own hearts on which our only desire is that the curtain may fall at once and for ever.

It was a relief to father and daughter alike, when a servant came in and announced “Mr. Gordon and a gentleman” as waiting in the alderman’s sitting-room. The latter rose with an inward thanksgiving, and hobbled off with considerable alacrity; while Bella, sitting over her cold tea, proceeded all unconsciously to give the parrot another lesson in suspiration.

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Her father was right. The girl was not altogether fancy free. She had allowed her silly little head to dwell upon the manifold excellences of a certain gentleman whom she was in the constant habit of meeting, until she fancied her heart had not escaped altogether scathless; and indeed, truth to tell, that organ had sustained a slight scratch or two, which smarted pretty sharply—such scratches as warn young ladies it is time to betake them to their defensive armour ere it be too late, and which in their innocence they take to be far more serious than they really are. There is but little irritation about a death-wound; when the arterial blood comes welling up throb by throb, agony gives place to exhaustion, and there is more peace than pain.

The certain gentleman took a large roll of papers from his pocket, and proceeded very methodically to untie the string. Had John Gordon been going to undergo decapitation, it was his nature to have turned his shirt-collar down, so as to crease it as little as possible. A tall man with moustaches, who the alderman recognised as Lord Holyhead, had already upset an inkstand, and was mopping up the stains with blotting-paper.

The alderman begged him to sit down, rang for sherry, and turned to John with his business face on.

The junior partner was about to state matters in his clearest manner, when the nobleman interposed. It was Holyhead's disposition to take the initiative in everything with which he had to do.

"Look ye here, Mr. Jones," said he, with another plunge at the inkstand, which John quietly removed beyond his reach, "I've come on purpose to say three words; you've had 'a facer.' I don't know what the trade call it, but *I* call it 'a facer.' You want time, of course; you must get your wind and go in again. Now, I've a strong claim upon you. I don't mean to urge it. I don't want it. I won't take a shilling. My bills are as good as bank-notes. You stood by me five years ago, when I wanted money; I mean to stand by you now so long as a plank holds; and if worst comes to worst, we'll go down together *all* standing, and so *bon soir la compagnie!* May I ring for my hack?"

"This is not business," gasped the alderman.

"This is not business," argued John Gordon.

"I shall never forget your offer, but I cannot accept it," continued the former.

"If you'll go through these papers with me," interposed the latter, "I can show you all the securities. We can

weather the gale yet if Newman and Hope ride through ; but we want a *man* out there sadly. See, I've got it all down in black and white."

"I have always been able to pay as I go," said the alderman, and a strange troubled expression came over that jolly face ; "to pay as I go, and owe no man anything. I never thought it would come to this, my good friends (for friends, and true ones, you are both of you). You're young and sanguine. Now, my advice is this—Wind up the accounts ; lump in everything I have of my own, and I can pay twenty shillings in the pound yet, and shut up shop altogether. To think that Jones and Co. should go out like this—Jones and Co. ! Jones and Co. !"

"Bother !" exclaimed Lord Holyhead. "Never say die till you're dead ! Mr. Gordon has my instructions. I mean what I say ; we settled everything this morning. You two must have plenty to talk about. Yes ; I'll have a glass of sherry, if you please, and then my hack. Good-bye, alderman. We'll pull through yet ; never say die, I tell you."

And his lordship bustled out of the room with even more noise than usual, to mask, as it were, his own consciousness of the staunch friendship he had shown, and the munificent offer of assistance he had made. It was not, however, in his nature to pass through the hall without rectifying all and any arrangements which his critical eye should deem amiss ; and it so chanced that the parrot, undergoing temporary banishment in this airy locality, had got entangled with his chain in the performance of his usual gymnastics, and was now showing no little wrath in his endeavours to extricate himself. It would not have been Holyhead could he have gone by without interference. Ere the footman could open the house-door his hand was in the cage, and with equal rapidity the parrot had bitten it to the bone. Bella, coming pensively downstairs, was startled to hear a good deal of fluttering and disturbance below, and a smothered oath, accompanied by expressions of impatience and pain ; nor was her equanimity restored by encountering a military-looking gentleman binding his fingers with a bloodstained handkerchief, and eyeing Polly, who swelled and sulked behind the bars, with suppressed resentment. The lady could not but stop to express her concern and apologise for the misbehaviour of her favourite. The cavalier, though he bled like a pig, could not but make light of the adventure in terms of fitting courtesy. The knight was wounded ; and severely too. It

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was the damsel's part to succour and to heal. The result was that Lord Holyhead's hack was sent round to the stable; a basin of warm water and some lint were produced; and John Gordon coming into the drawing-room for a missing letter some ten minutes after the catastrophe, found Bella bandaging Lord Holyhead's hand, and the two laughing merrily over the operation as if they had been friends from childhood.

It seemed to take a long time, and indeed all bandaging is a process requiring patience and dexterity. Lord Holyhead thought that was a very artless, pleasing face that looked up so kindly in his own, and "hoped it didn't hurt him"; also that a man might have a worse attendant, if he was really in a bad way, than a fresh-hearted, good-natured girl, helpful and unaffected, and comely too, besides. It came across him more than once, as he rode back into London, how neatly she had bandaged him up, how prettily she had behaved, how "that daughter of Jones was a deuced nice girl."

What Bella thought, I cannot take upon me to say. She certainly did not scold the parrot for his outbreak, but rather caressed and coaxed him, venturing her own pretty fingers without compunction; but Bella had a good many other matters just then to distract her attention from Polly and its misdemeanours. She was no blinder than the rest of her sex. What physical powers of vision are theirs as compared to ours! Muffle up the keenest-eyed detective of the force, in a widow's bonnet with a double crape veil, and he will blunder about like an owl in the daylight; but watch the bereaved one herself in the same head-dress, her eyesight seems to be rather stimulated than impaired by that impervious material, and she is as well aware of your glances of curiosity, perhaps admiration, as though her brow were bared in shameless defiance, rather than masked in the dense draperies of insidious design. Their moral sense is equally acute. Try to deceive a woman about your feelings, your likes and dislikes, your little prejudices and foolish whims. She looks through you at a glance. She detects your secret ere you have hardly told it to yourself; well for you if she do not abuse her power, and make it public to the whole circle of her acquaintance. Therefore, it is a wholesome maxim to have no secrets from a woman; or if the former be indispensable, to determine that the latter is not. Bella knew there was something wrong; so she counter-ordered the carriage and waited all the morning, resolved to have some explanation before Mr. Gordon went. It would be so much easier, she thought, to ask him than



J. H. Green

"It was the damsel's part to succour
and to heal"

papa ; and Mr. Gordon, of course, would satisfy her curiosity ; he was so frank and honest, and always so kind to her. Nothing could be easier than to get it all out of John Gordon !

Luncheon was announced, and suffered to get cold. What a long confabulation that seemed to be in papa's room ! would it never be over ? At last a door opened, ominous sound to nerves strained with expectation ; a footstep crossed the hall towards the drawing-room. John Gordon entered with his usual cold and unembarrassed air. It did not seem half so easy to cross-question him now. Bella rose from her chair, felt her knees trembling, and sat down again. John stood *Anglice* with his back to the empty fireplace ; *Anglice* also he broached the important subject in the most indifferent tones.

"Miss Jones," he began, "is there anything I can do for you at Sydney?"

I don't believe she knew where Sydney was. From his manner she might have inferred it was a little farther off than Regent Street.

"At Sydney!" she gasped. "What! are you going away? I don't understand."

"I am going across to Australia," said John, as a man would observe he was going to step "over the way." "It's a little matter of business, Miss Jones, and won't take long to settle. What shall I bring you back? A couple of kangaroos would be very nice pets. I shall be home in a year, or eighteen months at farthest."

A year or eighteen months! And Bella was barely twenty. It seemed a lifetime. She snatched up some needlework, and stooped busily over it to conceal the tears that were falling thick and fast upon her hands. John observed her emotion, and somewhat wilfully ignored its cause. At anyrate, he thought it advisable to place it on some other score than his own departure ; so he resumed his conversation in a kind and brotherly tone.

"You ought to know, Miss Jones, that mercantile people, like ourselves, are subject to certain ups and downs which no amount of attention or probity can entirely control. Your father's business has been much neglected in Australia. It is possible that everything might be lost in consequence of a failure there" (John had a discretionary power from the alderman, who dreaded breaking the matter to his daughter himself). "Someone who is intimately acquainted with our affairs should be on the spot; and that is why I am going over at such short notice. If worst come to the worst, Bella," he added, taking her hand, "there will still be enough saved

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to live upon ; and you will have your father left. You don't know how fond he is of you, Bella."

The tears were falling unconcealed now. Mingled feelings were forcing them to her eyes. She loved her father very dearly ; and it was dreadful to hear worldly ruin thus spoken of as no improbable contingency. How touching, too, was John Gordon's sympathy and brotherly kindness ; he had never spoken to her in such a tone as this before ; and yet her woman's instinct told her that it was a tone of protection rather than attachment ; that it was not thus he would have alluded to his departure, had he been exactly what she wished. What did she wish him to be ? Poor girl ! she hardly knew herself. So she had no resource but to go on crying ; and having no more pertinent remark to make, only sobbed out—

"Such a long way off!—such a long way!"

John Gordon was not easily softened. He was sorry for her ; but that was all.

"Bella," said he, still retaining her hand, "you have a duty to perform. We have all our different tasks in a difficulty like the present. Yours is to comfort your father, to keep up his spirits, and attend to his health. Mine is to lose no time in making preparations. I shall scarcely be able to see you again. God bless you, Bella, and good-bye."

They were cold words, though they were so kind. In honest truth, they were kinder for being cold ; but each by each sank very chill upon the girl's heart. Yet, even then, her thoughts were less for her own disappointment and loneliness than for his coming voyage. She seized his hand in both of hers, and pressed it affectionately.

"Good-bye," she said, looking up with a face all blurred with tears. "You'll sail in a safe ship ; and promise me, Mr. Gordon, promise me you won't go without a life-belt!"

John could not forbear a smile. One more good-bye—one more tight clasp of the hand—and he was gone.

Then the alderman came in, and Bella had her cry out comfortably, sitting on her old father's knee, and leaning her forehead against his shoulder. To him it was an immense comfort that he could talk matters over with his child ; that there was no longer any concealment between them ; and that now, even if the blow did fall, it would not fall unexpectedly upon Bella. It is strange how the old dread worldly ruin for their children far more than for themselves ; that though they have lived long enough to learn the low value of rentes and consols as promoters of happiness ; though they have discovered that *non ebur neque aurum* overlaying the roof of

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a palace is to be compared to the humble heart's-ease that can flourish well enough beneath the cottage wall ; though they have seen the rich weary and dissatisfied, the poor hopeful and contented ; they should still covet for their dearest that which they are too well aware has never profited themselves. The alderman could have lived on two hundred a year in perfect comfort for his own part, but he had dreaded breaking to Bella that they might have to manage between them on something less than thrice that income. Now they could talk it over unrestrained. Now he could tell her of Lord Holyhead's magnanimity, and John Gordon's good management, and the business, and the losses, and their past mistakes, and their prospects for the future.

Bella cared very little for poverty. Like other women, she had been lavish enough of money when it was abundant. Like them, too, she would be sparing of it when it was scarce. Affairs brightened considerably, as they generally do when people look them in the face. And before they had sat together for an hour, Bella was already loud in Lord Holyhead's praises, and had made her father laugh at her description of his encounter with the parrot ; but of John Gordon and his coming voyage, uppermost as the subject was in her mind, poor Bella could not yet bring herself to speak.

CHAPTER XVIII

BON VOYAGE!

'TIS a grand study of perspective, that long straight vista of wide, substantial, respectable Portland Place. Every time I look down it I wonder anew at the spire in Langham Place, speculating whether it does really run up to a point as sharp as a needle; and admiring hugely, the while, that architectural enthusiasm which could discover either beauty or grandeur in the design of such a structure. The same idea would appear to have occurred to Lady Gertrude, as she sat back in her aunt's barouche gazing into mid-air, and totally unconscious, as it would seem, of a familiar step coming rapidly along the pavement towards the carriage.

It is a long way, I say, from one end of Portland Place to the other, and there are a good many pairs of bay horses, and a good many liveries in London closely resembling those of Lady Olivia. It must have been, therefore, some purely accidental motive which prompted John Gordon to stop his hansom cab at the top of that thoroughfare, and to dismiss it considerably over-paid a long way short of its destination. Cupid, we all know, is as blind as a bat, so the boy with the bow could have had nothing to do with this proceeding; and though John's eye was that of a hawk, he might have had far more important subjects to occupy him than the colour of a coat or the identity of a carriage. Besides, how could he possibly distinguish it at such a distance? He stopped the hansom, nevertheless, and jumped out incontinent. First, he walked very fast, somewhat to the surprise of his late driver, who followed; then he relapsed into an enforced steady pace, resolving to pass the carriage without speaking, but only taking off his hat—a salute which might have been performed as effectually, if not so gracefully, from the hack-cab. Lastly, he came to a halt, shook hands with Lady Gertrude, leant his arm upon the barouche door, and held his tongue.

The lady was delighted to see him; "where had he been

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these ages?—and Gilbert—did he know anything of Gilbert? he has not been near us for a week.”

John's tones were very short and stern, as he replied, “I have been engaged with business day and night, but I cannot conceive how Gilbert can be absent from his post. It is inexcusable in him.”

“Why?” asked the young Delilah, with an admirable assumption of confusion, looking down the while and showing her eyelashes to great advantage.

John had not forgotten the last time he had seen the cousins together, so he replied somewhat unfairly—

“Does not Gilbert belong to you?”

She was resolved to punish him for divers faults of omission and commission, so she answered in a softened tone, and still with downcast eyes—

“Well, so he does, you know, to a certain extent; but he's very wilful, I assure you; I can't manage him a bit sometimes.”

She was no mean physiognomist, my Lady Gertrude, and she had studied the countenance opposite to her till she had learned it by heart, so she saw what no one else would have remarked, the slightest possible quivering of the eyelid, and indrawing of the lip, therefore she knew the last shaft had reached the inner ring.

It is poor fun for the target; he moved haughtily back to go away, head up, and the stern look deepening visibly on his face. She had not half done with him yet; there was a whole sheaf of arrows left, and she had no fear that the string would break: a woman never has, till too late; and then who so aghast as Maid Marion herself to find she cannot mend it again?

“Don't go yet, Mr. Gordon,” said she; “Aunt Olivia won't have done her visit for half an hour at least. I cannot stand old Mrs. Moribund, so I said I'd sit in the carriage and wait. I always think of what you told me about her that night at Lady Broadway's.”

Now that night at Lady Broadway's was one of John's pleasant recollections. It matters not to you or me why; but that its charms were somehow connected with Lady Gertrude, we gather from her thus alluding to it as a sweetener.

Mr. Gordon, as in duty bound, placed his arm once more on the carriage door. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her he was going to leave her with regret, to remind her of the many pleasant hours they had spent together, to confess

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to her that nothing but unavoidable necessity would induce him to go so far from her, and to ask her in a whisper, inaudible to the servants, not to forget him entirely while he was away; but she tumbled the whole fabric down herself, as they will, with a light word and a scornful laugh.

"How grave you look!" said she; "you men of business never can forget it even for an hour. Confess now, you're dying to get back to the City at this moment. I wish Gilbert was here to take a sketch of you as the Knight of the Rueful Countenance."

John smiled grimly.

"I fear I cannot spare any more time, even to be caricatured, Lady Gertrude," said he; "I have a good many things to do, because I am going out of town to-night."

"Out of town!" she rejoined carelessly; "where to? not Newmarket?"

It was John's turn to have a shot now. He drew the bow to its full stretch with strong, pitiless arm.

"To Sydney," he said; "good-bye."

It went deftly through the joints of her harness, and quivered doubtless in the quick; but it is the Amazon's instinct to conceal her hurt, even were it a death-wound; and Lady Gertrude was a pullet of the game.

"To Sydney!" she repeated; "how sick you will be in this east wind. *Bon voyage!*" and she laughed again as she shook hands; but the laugh was forced and somewhat feeble, and the farewell died out upon her lips.

John walked steadily and slowly away; he turned out of the street without so much as looking back. She could not forbear watching to see whether he would. Step by step, she heard the measured tread die away, and from her seat in the carriage she watched the retreating figure till it disappeared; then her heart smote her sore, and of course she was very angry with him, quite as angry as if she had known that the instant he was round the corner, he started off for the City at the rate of five miles an hour. This was their farewell, and a sufficiently uncomfortable one; not much for a man to look back to in a dismal sea-voyage, spun out to weeks and months; not much for a young lady to dwell upon during the weary process of undergoing pleasures from which the essence has been extracted; but enough to make both regret very keenly that they had shown so little consideration for each other's feelings, so little providence in storing up some small comfort for the vacant hours of the future.

The pleasure of suffering is one of the peculiarities of the



'How grave you look!' said she

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human mind which I despair of ever being able to analyse. Why does our nature wince so apprehensively from the slightest touch applied to a physical wound, yet offer a moral one with such morbid eagerness to the probe? Why are we pitiless in proportion as we love? delivering our fiercest thrusts at the bosom we would gladly shield with our lives, and watching the pangs of our victim with an exultation that sufficiently avenges itself? Doubtless we are enduring the while tenfold what we inflict. Yet, to my mind, this paradoxical explanation only serves to render the tendency more incomprehensible.

The high-bred ones take their punishment, too, with an unruffled brow. So long, at least, as a human eye is on them, they preserve that noble regard for *les convenances* which would seem to be the first of duties in their moral creed. Dido, self-pierced on her funeral pyre, would lay her queenly limbs to rest in no unseemly attitude. Cleopatra, be sure, applied the asp where its festering bite would least disfigure the shapely bosom. I have seen a gentle, soft-nurtured lady stagger as if she was shot at the *fiat* which was indeed to her the equivalent of a death-sentence, yet rear her head a moment afterwards to confront her fate with all the defiant pride of a knightly Paladin; and I have wondered that the stem of the lily should resist like the trunk of the oak. 'Tis strange how extremes meet—how at either end of civilisation the stoicism which ignores pain should be considered a quality essential to the dignity of man. I was sitting once on a western prairie, in a lodge of Sioux Indians; brawny champions they were, large of limb and indomitable of appetite, smoking in solemn silence, and enjoying a pleasure of which the pale-face is ignorant—the torpid luxury of repletion. Two braves galloped into the camp with a prisoner; and perhaps I was the only male present who showed the slightest interest in the proceeding. A few squaws, indeed, stared and pointed, jabbering to each other with the natural tendency of their sex to examine and enlarge upon a novelty; but the imperturbable warriors confined themselves to a sonorous grunt and a hitch of the blankets on their shoulders.

Yet was it a picturesque sight, too, and one to rivet the attention even of a savage. The braves in their war-paint grim and ghastly, their grotesque fringes and appointments; beads, and thongs, and streaming scalp-locks whirling about them as they darted to and fro on their shaggy steeds, their weapons uplifted and threatening in the bravado of triumph, and their war-whoop ringing wild and shrill in the ears of

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their captive, a welcome challenge once, a death-note now. They seemed to have no modest scruples in celebrating their own exploits, and every sentence ended with a brutal gibe at the fallen foe. He was a youth, apparently not more than twenty years of age, slender of limb and delicate of feature, yet evidently already a warrior of no mean reputation, by the barbaric splendour of his accoutrements, above all by the trophies hung around his neck, nothing less than the huge claws of a grisly bear, the noblest collar of knighthood that the Red Indian is fain to possess. I think if I was asked whom I considered the most perfect specimen of a gentleman that I have ever seen, I should say that young brave of the Blackfeet. He never departed for a moment from his bearing of calm, defiant courtesy; to the taunts of his captors he made the most simple and dignified replies, and the preparations for his torture he contemplated with a quiet, uninterested observation which scarcely amounted to curiosity.

I will not detail the horrors that were inflicted on him; do what they would, it was impossible to make him wince. His *physique* seemed to be bronze, like his skin; and still he preserved the same calm, courteous expression of countenance throughout. Even his tormentors were forced to acknowledge that his was a scalp would grace the boldest warrior's belt. At last they paused, wearied with their fiendish exertions; and then the young brave spoke. His deep guttural tones were steady and measured, though low from exhaustion.

"The sun is yet high," said he; "are you wearied already, that you will leave 'the Leaping Deer-wolf' to go to sleep?"

They were his last words; in a short half-hour his scalp hung at the girdle of "Steep-Rock," who took him; and "the Leaping Deer-wolf" was well on his way to the happy hunting-grounds where the grass never withers, and the water never fails, and the buffalo feed in countless thousands over the dreamy prairies of the spirit land.

So the highest pitch of refinement, though its tendency must unquestionably be to render the nervous system extremely susceptible, provides at the same time a check upon their sensibilities, in the self-command which it exacts from its disciples. Total impassibility is the chief qualification for the charmed circle. Are you pleased? you must by no means exult and clap your hands. Are you disgusted? you shall stamp not, neither shall you swear. A loud laugh is a solecism only second in enormity to a wet cheek. To be seen with the latter, it is needless to observe, would condemn the sufferer at once. If you would be respected, you must never

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subject yourself to pity; if you would have influence, you must never seek for sympathy.

Lady Gertrude bore up bravely enough through a wearisome round of morning visits, preferring to undergo the platitudes of Lady Olivia and her dowager friends, rather than endure her own society any more in the open carriage. She was absent, no doubt, and answered somewhat at random, not listening very attentively to the conversation; nor can I affirm that she was any great loser thereby, inasmuch as it consisted chiefly of remarks concerning the weather, the medical man who was first favourite for the time, and the crush last night at Lady Pleiad's, all delivered in admonitory and by no means approving spirit. It was a great relief to get home to the canary and the arm-chair in the boudoir upstairs.

"I'll ring when I want you," said Lady Gertrude to her officious maid, bustling in with the indispensable cup of tea; and then she locked the door, and put off the heavy armour she had worn so bravely for hours, and laid it by for a season, not to be resumed till the *mêlée* to-night, and bathed her wounds, so to speak, encouraging them to bleed freely now that the pressure was withdrawn. She was no longer the frigid fashionable young lady, with cold eyes and haughty smile, regardless of all alike; but the helpless, yielding woman, burying her face in her white hands, and weeping as if her heart would break.

It did her good, though. She learned more about Lady Gertrude in one of those paroxysms of sorrow than she had known in all her life before. The frost must break up with storms and rain, and the floods burst wildly down, carrying before them many a tangled fence and artificial embankment, ere the saturated soil can teem with life and hopes, ere the violet can peep out, and the meadow don her grass-green kirtle, and soft-eyed Spring smile welcome upon earth once more.

CHAPTER XIX

“WHY DO YOU GO TO THE OPERA?”

WE left Gilbert in a most uncomfortable frame of mind, grieved, and bitter, and angry above all with the person he best loved. It is, perhaps, the mood in which we are least disposed to take a rational or even a sane view of our position. A man who thinks himself ill-used is invariably selfish; he cannot take interest in any subject but his grievance; and if it should be one on which good taste forbids him to enlarge, he relapses into a state of sudden dejection, and justifies himself for being ill-tempered by assuming that he is bored. Ladies in a parallel attack enjoy the privilege of pleading ill-health; what our neighbours call a *migraine* is an invaluable refuge, and “the nerves” are to-day an excellent substitute for what our grandmothers denominated “the spleen.” But with the rougher sex such excuses are simply absurd; a fellow cannot ask you to believe he is nervous, with the appetite of an Esquimaux and the colour of a ploughman; while the plea of a headache, unless it be a convivial one, you laugh ruthlessly to scorn. There are two courses for him to pursue—either to sulk by himself till he gets better, or to rush into every description of amusement and dissipation till he forgets his own annoyances and his own identity. Another and the only effectual remedy—namely, to busy himself in fulfilling his duties and doing good—is so rarely adopted, that I think it unnecessary to recommend it, although certain sufferers who have honestly tried it vouch most implicitly for its efficacy. The fashionable cure, however, would seem to be continual change of scene, and a course of what is humorously called gaiety.

It was simply because he did not know what on earth to do, that Gilbert found himself in the back of Mrs. Montpellier's box at the opera, endeavouring to adapt his manners and conversation to the locality. Hurt he was, and sore, to think that he should have been so duped by his own infatuation; that he should have flung himself so recklessly away

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without equivalent. His pride was lowered; even his vanity was wounded; above all, his trust in his own better feelings was shaken; and herein he showed the nice judgment and close reasoning of a man in love. It was just a fortnight since he had seen Ada, a woman with whom it was his dearest wish to spend an eternity, and that one fortnight seemed to have made an irremediable breach between them. Moreover, were he so determined, there was no absolute impossibility to prevent their meeting to-morrow or the next day, or some time within the week; but no—he preferred to torture himself by imagining barriers which did not exist, and a thousand improbabilities as unjust to her as they were derogatory to him.

Therefore he exerted himself to appear gayer and in better spirits than usual in the eyes of Mrs. Montpellier, and those glittering orbs saw through him at a glance; while their owner resolved, womanlike, to have his secret ere he was many hours older; also womanlike, we must in justice add, to assist him by all means in her power, and stand by him through thick and thin. So she made him sit in the chair close behind her, leaving the place of honour opposite for such comers and goers as she had no wish to detain, and began to feel her way insidiously, as they do, with innocent questions.

“Off duty to-night, Mr. Orme? Your mother’s box, I see, is empty, and no Lady Gertrude.”

A movement of impatience betrayed him.

“I haven’t seen Gertrude for a week,” he answered; “I should have dined with them on Sunday if I had not been engaged to you. You see you make me forget all my duties;” he laughed as he spoke, and began to scan the house through his glasses.

“And very absent and disagreeable you were,” said she, crossing her two pretty forefingers as she laid them on the cushion. “Do you know, I think you have an atrociously bad temper, Mr. Orme, or else you’re very unhappy about something or somebody. Come, I’m an old friend, what is it?”

He smiled somewhat bitterly. He was thinking how kind everybody else was to him, how they courted his society, and appreciated whatever good qualities he might have; why should *one* so neglect and despise him? He came to the front of the box, and leaned his elbows on it, still scanning the house with an abstracted, vacant gaze; and *one* sitting far back in an upper tier was devouring every feature of his face

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the while, through a pair of bad glasses that tinged everything with a pink hue, and was impressing, as it were, his picture on her brain, for she was resolved never—*never* to see him again; at least, not till he was fairly married to his cousin, and she could look back calmly and even laugh at the impossible fancies of which she had allowed herself to be the dupe. So, in the meantime, it was doubtless judicious to give way to the influence of the hour, the scene, the lights, above all, the music; to watch every turn of the dear face and the noble head; to lose herself in an enraptured dream of what might have been had black been white, and everything changed, and the whole social fabric overturned for her especial bliss.

But even in the midst of this self-deluding vision she was jealous of him. That was the most ridiculous thing of all. Though she had resolved never so much as to speak with him again, to abjure part or parcel in his present, his future, everything but his past—she could not quite give that up; though she had clearly resolved she had no right ever even to think of him now, she could not help a pang of jealousy at his visible attentions to another. She should not have minded Lady Gertrude, she thought, so much; but who was this dark-haired, dashing dame, in whose opera-box he seemed so completely at home? How she wished she had a right to counsel him, to plead with him, to implore him for his own and his wife's happiness to alter his ways! How she would have liked to write to him a kind, persuasive letter, full of good advice and pure sisterly interest, which perhaps he would answer, or would ask for an interview to have explained, and then—the card-castle tumbled to pieces, as the chill consciousness came back that they could have nothing in common—nothing! that between them there was a great gulf, none the less impassable that it was imaginary. The pink-tinged glasses were useless to eyes dim with tears. She laid them down and turned wearily back to the mock sufferings on the stage.

Bravoura was singing her best and loudest, shuffling about on her knees in imitation of a star that shines no longer. It was her favourite part, and required indeed no little gymnastic prowess, as well as great vocal powers, to fill to her own satisfaction. The opera was perhaps more remarkable for dramatic incident than lucidity of plot. Everybody was attached to the wrong everybody else, and neither the dagger nor the bowl was spared in order that Bravoura might have the stage to herself for certain scenes,

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in which her *contralto* would prove most effective. How high she went up, how low she came down, how spasmodically she twisted the turns of her variations, how she strained her massive throat, and grappled with her deep bosom, in shouts of triumph or shrieks of woe, never out of time or tune, it is impossible for a non-professional to describe. Sufficient to say that Bravoura outdid herself, that Holyhead thought he never saw her look so ugly, and that Mrs. Montpellier resumed her cross-examination of Gilbert under cover of the noise.

“Mr. Orme,” she said, looking kindly and pityingly in his face, “I am a good deal older than you. Dear me, I might be your mother almost—at least in India. I should call you Gilbert if there was anyone else in the box. Tell me what it is that makes you so unlike yourself? It’s no use laughing and shaking your head, and calling me ‘your dear Mrs. Montpellier.’ Of course, I’m your dear Mrs. Montpellier. I’ve always stood up for you, and fought your battles, and preferred you to most people. That is why I never wished you to make love to me; and to do you justice, I don’t think you ever tried. I like you all the better, for I don’t want to lose you as a friend, and indeed I have not too many as times go. Now you’re a boy compared to me. No, I don’t dye my hair, though I’m much obliged to you for looking at it so suspiciously; but I’m nearly forty, all the same. Listen to me. I’ve seen far more than you have. You know the world as prosperous people know it, just as you know this house all lit up at midnight; but you haven’t seen it cold and comfortless at eleven o’clock in the day, and you don’t know yet what the real world is any more than a child. Will I teach it you? I wish I could. You’ll have to learn some harder lessons than I would set you. That is why I’m schooling you now, you innocent dunce. I’m no cleverer than my neighbours; but you don’t suppose a woman goes through such a life as mine, is married twice, and loses all I have lost” (here the kind voice trembled audibly), “to come out of the crucible quite such a fool as she went in. Now you shall not come to grief, as you call it, because you have no one to take an interest in you and warn you in time. Tell me what your grievance is, and *foi de femme*, I’ll help you, if I have to cut off my right hand to do it—bracelet and all. Is it money?”

“You are too kind,” he said, really touched by her honest straightforward friendship and sweet womanly sym-

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pathy. "Money! You don't think so badly of me, I hope, as to suppose such a difficulty as that would make me unhappy?"

He spoke as a man does who has never known what it is to want a pound, much less a shilling.

"I am glad of that," she replied. "Not but what I could have helped you even then. I don't the least mind their calling me 'the Begum'; and wealth has its advantages, no doubt. But still it is pleasanter to have no dealings of that sort between you and me. Well, if it isn't money, it must be love. Don't wince. You've got into a scrape. Honestly, now, there's a woman at the bottom of all this? Tell me the truth."

Gilbert laughed and looked foolish. It seemed very absurd to be thus cross-examined; and yet he felt it would be an immense relief to talk over his sorrows, and he knew he could trust his companion—the staunchest and most considerate of all confidants, a female friend.

"Yes," he said, "you're right. I don't mind telling you there is a 'somebody'; but it's a foolish business. It can never come to good, and I'm very unhappy about it."

"*Le bien d'autrui?*" she asked, with a sharp, eager glance. "Oh, Mr. Orme, for Heaven's sake, be wise! I have seen it so often, and I never knew it answer. Go out of town; go abroad—go to India even—anything rather than *that*."

Her obvious earnestness gave him confidence.

"No, no," he replied; "if it were so, I believe I should go mad. But I know you mean what you say. I know you won't show me up. I know you would help me if you could. Give me your advice, and tell me what I ought to do."

So, with many breaks and stoppages, and much hesitation, out it all came; how he had met the siren, and heard her seductive strains, and fallen a victim to the charm of the ear and the lust of the eye, and, above all, the longing of the heart; how he had watched for her, and worshipped her rather as an angel than a woman; and how her very station was his greatest impediment, not because it was inferior to his own, but lest she should dream for an instant that he presumed on such inferiority, for indeed with all her softness and attractions, she had the bearing of a queen. Whereat Mrs. Montpellier smiled, recalling the while certain similar rhapsodies that had once been whispered in her own ear. "If they only knew us," thought Mrs. Montpellier, "they wouldn't imagine us to be either angels or queens; but men are such fools, they never can understand that the same bait

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which takes a sprat will take a salmon, and that Cinderella in the ballroom is no more invulnerable than Cinderella in the kitchen.”

Gilbert meanwhile, floundering about in his confessions, was compelled to acknowledge the real profession and antecedents of his divinity. To do him justice, he rather gloried in them at heart; but yet the force of habit and education was so strong that he could not help looking appealingly in his listener's face while he told his tale. There was that in his glowing earnest countenance and the accent of his voice, which spoke of faith, and sincerity, and depth of feeling for which, prejudiced as she was in his favour, she would scarcely have given him credit. Could this be the careless, good-humoured dandy who was proverbial for his utter *insouciance* and hardness of heart? She began to experience a certain curiosity as to the “somebody” who could have taken captive this champion among the Philistines, and longed to see the weapon that could thus pierce an armour of proof hitherto deemed impenetrable. Many motives combined to interest her in the progress of an attachment which partook of the nature both of tragedy and farce, which might turn out either in its *dénouement*, but which she began to suspect was rather too strong to be pleasant to the actors immediately concerned; for she could not but conceive that the “somebody” must be as devoted to Gilbert as he obviously was to her. So she pondered for a minute or so before she spoke, and Bravoura's *roulades* made the chandeliers jingle again the while.

“And you like her very much?” she said, in a low, impressive tone.

By the way, why does a woman *love* her dog, her china, her new dress, but only talks of *liking* when it is a case of an unfortunate in the toils? Probably on the same principle that the spider *likes* the bluebottle buzzing in her web, to the destruction of the fabric, but also to the clumsy insect's own utter discomfiture.

“I would do anything on earth for her,” answered Gilbert, in a tone of suppressed feeling. “She's the only woman in the world to me.”

“And you wouldn't injure her or vex her, or make her unhappy in any way?” pursued the lady.

“I would give my life to preserve one of the hairs of her head,” was his reply. “I tell you there is nothing I wouldn't do, nothing I wouldn't endure, to spare her a moment's sorrow or uneasiness.”

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"And yet, Mr. Orme, you couldn't well marry a music-mistress," observed Mrs. Montpellier, quite simply and quietly.

Now such a remark as this with nine men out of ten would have been judicious and effective. It was indeed, as the old Romans would say, "touching the matter with the point of a needle;" it was placing before him in the clearest light the absurdity of his position, disillusioning him in the most simple matter-of-fact way of the romance in which he had chosen to wrap himself up. It ignored all heroism and martyrdom, and such morbid exaggeration, and was but a civil manner of expressing a sentiment which is seldom without its due influence—"What a fool Mrs. Grundy will think you!"—and as such it was no doubt a weighty and unanswerable argument. But Gilbert didn't care for Mrs. Grundy. That ubiquitous lady had petted and encouraged him till, like any other spoiled child, he was very regardless of the good opinion of his nurse. "You couldn't well marry a music-mistress." This was exactly the question he had never yet asked himself point-blank. It was now brought before him as a foregone conclusion, a social impossibility. Couldn't he? We should see! There was a strong leavening of opposition in his character, as there is in most of those who are capable of self-sacrifice, and to such a temperament as his it was delightful to think that he had much to give, that the condescension would not be all on his mistress's side: for, like a true knight, he had never thought of himself as worthy of the least of her regards. After all, this would solve the difficulty at once. He would find her out if the world held her; he would see her again before he was twenty-four hours older. Mrs. Montpellier had suggested the very thing he would give all he had to accomplish; and he made an inward vow, as he folded that lady carefully in her shawl, that he *would* marry the music-mistress if she could be induced to accept him. The latter contingency would probably scarce have occurred to anyone else, certainly not to a disheartening extent; but it was sure to cast a gloom over the visions of one who was deeply and truly in love.

As he took Mrs. Montpellier to her carriage, good-natured friends in the crush-room arrived at their own conclusions as to their sudden alliance. He had been in her box all the evening!—he had never left her for an instant! Even now they seemed to be whispering about something very interesting. What would Lady Gertrude say? and Mr. Montpellier?—if he was really alive, which many people affirmed, or if, as

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Lady Visigoth observed, “there ever *was* such a person;” “not that *she* was surprised the least—it was all of a piece— young Orme was going fast to the dogs, no doubt, but she couldn’t blame *him*. And really now, the woman was old enough to be his mother.”

CHAPTER XX

THE FALSE GOD

LIKE all old people, I must tell my story my own way or not at all. I have seen my grandmother (now I trust canonised) drivelling over her knitting during a livelong summer's day. Here she would skip a whole row, with that appearance of carelessness which is perhaps the greatest triumph of art; there she would "drop three stitches and take up one" with grave perseverance and perplexing ingenuity. Anon the ball of worsted would roll off her venerable knees, and escape into all sorts of impracticable corners, an object for the gambols of the kitten or the admiration of the two-year-old sprawling on the floor. Sometimes the work would seem to progress, sometimes to retrograde. Yesterday, all four pins revolving like the arms of a windmill; to-day, two or three of them stationary as the legs of a piano-forte—yet somehow the task went on; through every dilemma, through every misadventure, the fabric grew larger, and a ribbed worsted stocking, that it tickled you to look at, was the eventual result. Is it not so with a tale that is told? The thread is continually escaping, the work constantly entangled, the pins seldom equably sharing the toil. Still, row by row, and line by line, the manufacture comes to a conclusion; and, like the stocking, is footed and finished, and produced with all its imperfections, to be used and worn out, or to be condemned and put away.

My ball is rolling to-day beyond the reach of child or kitten, far out upon the floor. This is to be a chapter devoted to moralising. Like knitting, it is a humble, prosaic, and somniferous pursuit; like knitting also, such as it is, it has a certain result. You can always skip it and pass on, or you can wade through it with laborious condescension, marking the while where the skein is entangled and the stitches have been dropped.

I have heard of a ship sailing for a distant port, well-manned, well-provisioned, well-found in stores and tackle, and

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every kind of gear. Her destination was familiar to captain and crew, her charts were clear and accurate, she lay her course to a nicety by the bearings of her compasses; and yet this ship went to shore five hundred miles and more out of her due reckoning, and so going to pieces, was lost with all her cargo upon a reef. The underwriters were beside themselves. Never was such a thing known! The captain must have been mad, or drunk, or incompetent—perhaps all three; he deserved to be drowned, which he was not, and his escape was the more fortunate as he was enabled eventually to account for the catastrophe. He had studied his charts and taken his bearings accurately; he had not neglected his duty for an instant, and the ship's head had never wavered a point off her safest course. She answered her helm admirably, and the alternate Tritons at the wheel were able seamen one and all, who could steer her to an inch by the compasses before them. And here was the whole mischief—the compass itself was in error. A quantity of iron, placed for greater security about the binnacle, had caused a considerable variation of the magnetic needle; and the very instrument that should have been her truest safeguard, proved that hapless ship's destruction. Many days of cloudy weather had prevented her officers from taking a celestial observation; and the influence of the currents, as usual, had considerably affected her dead reckoning. Thus she drove forward in perfect confidence, faster and faster towards her fate—struck—filled—broke up—and so went down.

How often I think of that ship when I reflect on the wide ocean of life! What avail all the blocks and stars and canvas of the prosperous barque, the friends who surround and support us, the advantages of position, rank, or genius; nay, the very wealth that fills our sails? What avails the well-known chart that most of us study at least *once* in the week, that warns us of every shoal and every danger, and shows us the only true course to lead to the wished-for haven? What avails the dead reckoning of respectability, and worldly advantage, and self-interest—nay, the very compass of ethical morality itself—if we never take a celestial observation on our own account, if we never bend the knees in humility and raise the eyes to heaven in prayer?

This alone can save us from shipwreck. All other precautions are good in their way—wise, discreet, and advantageous—but this is indispensable. Many a great mind has neglected it; many a code of exceeding subtlety and sagacity has omitted it from its scheme. What has been the result?

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neglected or slurred over the Divine Spirit that vivified and sanctified the whole. What is education, after all? Is it a dull routine like the work of a horse in a mill, to be trod by every disposition alike? Is it sufficient that each disciple should be taught in turn to construe, and parse, and scan; to admire old Homer's hexameters with Dacier, and criticise Horace's iambics with Anthon? nay, to obtain a thorough insight into, and acquaintance with, the elegancies and the manners of Greece and Rome, the while trigonometry, logarithms, and conic sections are not wholly neglected? Or is it a preparatory course of training for the great struggle that every child of man must hereafter wage, of which the prize is—what?—success in this life? Who was ever satisfied with it? Earthly happiness? Who will confess to it? A quiet heart? Who has got it? What then? If it be what twelve poor Jews affirmed nearly two thousand years ago they knew it was, by direct inspiration; if it be what some millions of the bravest, and gentlest, and best on earth have since died believing it; if it be that without which you have perhaps never pictured to yourself what a blank would be your own identity; then surely it is not well to ignore in your preparation of the candidate the very aim and end you would fit him to attain.

I might have done much with Gilbert that I neglected to do. I could at least have sown broadcast a few grains of the good seed which so multiplies in a fertile soil under God's blessed sunshine. Here a little and there a little, and in that warm, kindly heart what a goodly harvest might have been the result! I dare not dwell on the contingency now. Still, if he had but had a mother, Gilbert's disposition would have been so different. If Lady Olivia could but have looked upon the boy as it is woman's instinct to look even on a stranger's child; if she had not thrust his tenderness away from her, and taught him, as it were, that to his mother alone he was unwelcome, her influence with a youth of his character would have been paramount. He was so tractable, so docile, so easily led. He was so loving and considerate to all that came about him, from his frightful old nurse down to Mouse, the long-suffering and never-resting pony. Brave and high-spirited as the boy was, a word of kindness would at any time bring the tears to his eyes. He would have required no teaching to love his mother, and his mother might so easily have taught him to love his God.

And yet Lady Olivia was what the world called a religious woman—a person of excellent principles—cold, pitiless,

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and unwavering. To be punctual in your payments, to "give tithes of all you possess," to exact implicit obedience from your inferiors; to offer outward homage to your betters, and to return with scrupulous accuracy the courtesies of your equals, this is to be thoroughly respectable, and for this be sure you will obtain your reward. You have never been tempted—therefore you shall spurn the fallen: you have never been in need—therefore you shall in no wise stretch a helping hand to the unfortunate. The outside at least of your own cup and platter you have kept clean and unseamed; so when your neighbour's pitcher is broken you shall stand exulting at the well-mouth, and mock his agony of thirst. All this is to be worldly wise and worldly virtuous. All this is to be eminent in a service of which the rewards are immediate and tangible, of which the medals and decorations hang glittering outside your breast; but I doubt hugely if it be the service of the cross. I doubt it may be but disobedience and rank mutiny in the eyes of Him who came to call "not the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

Lady Olivia called herself a miserable sinner once a week; also once a week she heard poor Gilbert his Catechism, as lucidly set forth in the Book of Common Prayer for the instruction of young Christians. The boy repeated it scrupulously by rote, standing the while on one particular square of the carpet, in a perfect perspiration of fear lest he should omit or mistake a single word. The slightest error was corrected with merciless severity; the task was fulfilled with undeviating exactitude. Whether this method of teaching the sublime and simple truths of our beautiful faith be the most advisable, it is not for me to question. I would only ask you, sir, a man of forty, if you can at this moment say the Church Catechism by heart? if you can explain it to your own satisfaction? if you can make that explanation clear to the intelligence of a child?

As the boy grew up, it was not likely that he would submit to the control of a mother who ruled by fear rather than love. Petticoat influence, indeed, is seldom either much regarded or dreaded by a man under thirty. By degrees he slipped his neck out of the yoke, I am bound to say, with perfect temper and good conduct.—He never spoke harshly or disrespectfully to Lady Olivia; but he simply absented himself as much as possible from her society, and ignored her authority altogether. Such a state of things was unnatural, and could not possibly lead to good. Then came all the excitement and temptations of the great world to be

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encountered in their most seductive form, without the one controlling principle which steadies even when it fails to guide, as the helm of a ship keeps her head well up to windward in a gale. A young man of fortune loose upon London, without domestic ties, and without a strong sense of religion, is not unlikely to make shipwreck. That Gilbert escaped so long, I can only attribute to his excellent natural disposition, to a certain degree of innate refinement that shrank intuitively from vice, even when the dame draped herself, as she well knows how to do, in her daintiest attire, and to a grave brotherly regard he entertained for his cousin Gertrude, whose alternate sarcasms and good counsels did not fail on more than one occasion to rouse in him that sense of self-respect and that strength of self-control, which the extremes of prosperity and adversity are so prone to annihilate.

Why he never fell in love with Gertrude it is not easy to say. Perhaps the very facility of winning prevented him from entering the arena; perhaps the most tempting fruit is always that which hangs out of reach, and it is poor sport to strike the quarry without the excitement of the chase. At the time when my story opens, the girl had almost made up her mind to marry him, and when such young ladies are in earnest they are not easily foiled. It is folly to speculate on what might have been. Would such a marriage have ensured his happiness here and hereafter? or would it but have made confusion worse confounded? There is no such thing as a suppositional past; and yet how prone we are to lament and bewail! "If I had only known. If I had but been a day sooner." If so, you would have been a different person, under different circumstances, in a different world; and the whole hypothesis explodes in its own absurdity.

Long before he was thirty, Gilbert had become a good-humoured, easy, unprincipled man of the world. I use the latter adjective in its narrowest sense. I do not mean to say that he was capable of any infamous act, and for what the world calls honour he had the most scrupulous regard; but I do mean to say that of such latitude as that world allows, totally irrespective of religion and morality, he was quite ready to avail himself. Like the bulk of his associates, he was also somewhat bored and *blasé*, as those must always be who expend immortal energies in hunting butterflies; but, like them, he accepted this weariness as an indispensable condition, and only strove to dispel it by a fresh pursuit after a fresh insect.

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If the butterflies had all been alike, flitting the same unvarying round within the garden walls, this would have been of less importance ; but in a fatal moment he was attracted by one of fairy colours and far-extended flight. Hot, breathless and exhausted, he followed it beyond the bounds of lawn and pleasure-grounds, far out and away into the wilderness. When Gilbert Orme first met Ada Latimer, he thought he had exhausted all the sensations and experiences of life. He fancied in his ignorance (was it pitiful or enviable?) that he had felt everything, done everything, that he was getting old in mind if not in body, and that there was very little left worth living for, but the common needs of everyday existence. To awake from such a state of torpidity was in itself delicious. There was a zest in everything now that even boyhood had failed to find ; he triumphed like a miser in his newly discovered treasure, pondered on it in secret, and hid it away in his inmost heart. In such a disposition as his there was a considerable leavening of the womanly element, which makes an amiable companion, but a weak man. The *besoin d'aimer* was strong within him. He had never got through that disease which, like the measles, it is best to encounter in early life, consequently it took a firm hold of his constitution. He had often been grazed before, but never hit, consequently the wound assumed an undue importance, and he pulled it about, and probed it till it festered and spread over his whole being.

His was a temperament capable of going any length where the affections as well as the passions were concerned. I have seen him, when a boy, plunge into a study which interested, or take up an amusement which fascinated him, with an energy and a persistency that of themselves predicated success. Contrary to one of the fundamental rules of mechanics, his *violentum* was also *perpetuum*, and he was a rare instance of impetuosity and perseverance combined. Beneath that careless, indolent exterior lay, dormant indeed, but only waiting to be aroused, strong passions, unbending resolution, an iron will that could strike fiercely on the instant, or wait doggedly for years, the whole tempered by a rare generosity and kindness of heart. Such a character, indeed, is powerful for good or for evil ; such a character, above all others, requires some guidance superior to the sordid motives that commonly sway mankind.

I have heard a theory broached which at first sight may appear untenable, but on which the more I reflect, the more I am convinced it contains a considerable leavening of truth. It is this, that there is a strong similarity in the characters of

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the very good and the very bad ; nay, that their prevailing qualities are actually identical, and that the difference, as in the mountain stream, depends upon the channel into which they may happen to be turned. It is a startling consideration truly, and more especially for those who have to do with the young. Doubtless it is difficult to define the exact point at which a virtue carried too far passes into its corresponding vice. It requires, indeed, a skilful moralist to decide where faith ends and fanaticism begins ; where courage becomes rashness, decision degenerates into self-conceit, or perseverance petrifies into obstinacy. The more I reflect on such ethical inconsistencies, the more hopelessly I lose myself in a maze of conjecture from which I feel there is no egress but by the light of revelation. No system of man's philosophy has ever yet been sufficient to satisfy the cravings of man's reasoning powers. It is better to accept humbly what we feel we cannot do without : it is better to believe than to understand, and while we take morality as a staff, to hold fast by religion as a guide.

Yes, we come back at last to the Druid's stones, to the Norseman's runes, to the Pythian oracle, and the Papist's mother of God. We must worship *something*. Have we not the simplest and noblest faith that was ever believed by man ? Can we not worship as that faith enjoins ?

There was no want of veneration in Gilbert. He was capable of a fanatic's devotion, body and heart and soul. God help him ! it was no cold, self-sufficing temperament that made such havoc with my boy.

"Little children, keep yourselves from idols?" Even in these Christian times idolatry is one of the crying sins of the human race. Be it the money-worship that reduces every thought and feeling to a golden standard ; be it the ambition that leaves not a moment for reflection or repose—be it the more amiable yet no less fatal folly that exalts a fellow-creature into a divinity—too surely does it mete out for itself its own retribution. It is a fine thing to be rich. It is grand to have power, and station, and influence. Above all, it is a golden dream to love. How sweet is it to treasure up something so dearly ! how ennobling to adore it so devotedly ! what unspeakable happiness in the utter self-abandonment and self-sacrifice ! can any pleasure of gain or success compare with that which we feel in pouring out all our wealth of life and hopes at our idol's feet ?—and yet—I wonder what the poor negro thinks of his fetish when, as must sometimes happen, he finds it break to pieces in his hand ?

CHAPTER XXI

A BOLD FRONT



HAVE often pondered whether the Marble Bride was marble all through; whether that astonished bridegroom whose betrothal in the tennis-court was so unguardedly brought about, took sufficient pains to thaw the stone-cold lady who was good enough to chill his uncomfortable couch. Is he the only gallant who has placed a ring on the finger of an image—ay, and found the finger curve itself so inflexibly that the ring would never come off again?

And should he not have endeavoured more diligently to penetrate the outward insensibility that resisted him, and to discover the living, loving woman, warm within that seeming statue-bride?

I don't think that Ada Latimer was flint to the very centre. I have my doubts that the outer mistrusted hugely, and so misrepresented, the inner woman, and I am not satisfied in my own mind that people usually take infinite pains to avoid those who are indifferent to them. Truth to tell, Ada's self-imposed penance began to grow very irksome. It was one thing to resolve that there could be nothing in common between herself and this dangerous fascination, and another to resign altogether even the merit of resisting its influence. Whilst she knew he was watching for her at every turn, and thinking of her every hour in the day, it was neither difficult nor altogether without a morbid gratification of its own to disappoint and torment him, and glory in the firmness and good sense that could thus triumph over temptation; but when he was gone out of town and far away, when he was surrounded by scenes and people with whom she had nothing to do; when it was his turn to be rational and strong-minded,

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and alive to his own interests, how would it be then? Ada began to think that prudence might be carried too far, that she had wilfully ill-used one from whom she had experienced unvarying deference and consideration; that she had been hasty, selfish, unjust, unkind. So surely as she got to this last word the tears rose to her eyes, and she thought how weak, how foolish, and how unhappy she was.

We have no English exponent for an uncomfortable feeling which our neighbours call *pitié de soi-même*. It is an enervating and deleterious sentiment, but by no means rare in either sex when under the influence of each other's attractions. Ada suffered from it intensely. It seemed so hard that she must work, work all her days, and never be happy. She felt so wasted in her lonely, loveless life; she who knew her own powers so well—as all do if they only would confess it; she who could have made such a home for one she loved, and been so happy in it herself, and it was not to be! She must not even have the ideal pleasure of worshipping a sentiment, a dream, a myth; for after all, this Mr. Orme had but been trifling with her and awakening her interest under false pretences. She had seen him herself only last night at the opera, in that dark bold-looking woman's box, apparently completely engrossed by his entertainer; and the face she was beginning to know so well rose up before her, and the kind eyes were looking into her own once more, till it seemed impossible he could be so false and unfeeling. And yet what had he to do there the whole evening, never once looking at the stage—for she had watched him narrowly, be sure—and talking all the time with such absorbing interest. If he were indeed so utterly unworthy, she ought to hate him—she would hate him! No, she would hate herself for loving him through it all.

Then she reflected this was worse and worse. Virtually, was he not even now another's? Miss Jones had said he was engaged to marry his cousin; she had herself seen the note to "dearest Gertrude." He could not but be devoted to such a girl as that, thought poor Mrs. Latimer; so handsome, so clever, so fluent—above all, so high-bred. It would indeed be his saving to make such a marriage. It could not but turn out well, and no one would be more rejoiced to hear of his welfare than herself. Yes, night and morning she would pray on her knees for his happiness. Such an interest, at least, was allowable! there could be no harm in that!

So having arrived at this conclusion, Ada bethought herself it was her bounden duty to recommence her music-lessons

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in Belgrave Square forthwith. She would take a double interest in Lady Gertrude now; and if it should so chance that the bridegroom-elect came in whilst the instruction was going on, why it was a proper punishment to undergo for the dreams she had permitted herself, and it would besides be an excellent test by which she might prove the purity of her own feelings and the firmness of her resolutions. Also she deserved some indulgence for her late self-denial, and she could not but admit that she would like to see him, if only once again, for the last time. If this desire was weak and wrong, she alone would have to pay the penalty; no one else could imagine what it would cost her. Surely if she chose to purchase the gratification at so high a price, she was entitled to do so; and then, it was to be positively for the last time!

Ay, those last times are very fatal. It is not the first step that costs so much; it is the "once again," the additional stone imposed that breaks down the whole fabric. A gambler wins such a sum of money as his highest hopes have scarcely calculated on, but he cannot leave the table without one more throw; he must try just once again. Fortune shakes her head and he loses, so he goes on to retrieve that single false step, to regain the *status ante*, which nobody ever did yet or ever will, and little by little his winnings disappear, and he rises from the table in far worse plight than he sat down. A tumbler repeats the arduous somersault for which he is celebrated in the profession, to the admiration of applauding hundreds, in wondrous succession. Breathless and exhausted, but fired by the loud *encores*, he tempts the sawdust "once again," and breaks his neck. It was by going "once again" to the well the hapless pitcher became a proverb. It is by listening "once again" to the vows whispered at that resort, the village maiden's heart shares the same fate. Depend upon it Don Quixote was right. When he had tried the strength of his pasteboard helmet by cleaving it in twain with one stroke of his good sword, he mended the battered head-piece carefully and deliberately enough, but he abstained from proving it "once again"!

So Mrs. Latimer resolved to write to Lady Gertrude and tell her the cold was better, and appoint a future time for the recommencement of the lessons; and to this she was the more disposed from the fact of her having an engagement to sing at the last morning concert of the season. Of course, if she could undertake the latter, she was bound to fulfil the former duty; and if truth must be told, she had rather set her heart upon this public display for more reasons than one. It was

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the day after her visit to the opera (a rare amusement for Ada, and we have seen how she enjoyed it!)—it would probably be crowded by those admirers of music who could not obtain such another indulgence of their tastes till next year. She ought not to neglect such an opportunity, for the favour of the musical world (she thought rather bitterly) was the very bread she ate. Also, she was to sing a certain song of which I have already spoken, and it was just possible Gilbert Orme might be there to hear it. You see how successfully Mrs. Latimer's self-discipline went on. You see how easy it is to warn the tide of human feelings—"Thus far shalt thou go, and no farther." How it is only necessary to say to yourself, "I will cease to care," to become completely indifferent. What a ductile instrument is this human heart of ours, which responds so harmoniously to our better judgment and our will; from which we can evoke whatsoever tones we desire, and which we can tune as we would a pianoforte or a harp, and never fear that a chord may be strung to too high a pitch, and so break once for all. Oh! it is a goodly life this inner life, when we strive to regulate it for ourselves! So calm, so independent, so ignorant of misgivings and remorse, so full of self-reliance and self-content! If you cannot rule your voice, Mrs. Latimer, more deftly than your feelings, there will be no small discord in the tune you have set yourself to sing. If your notes are to be no steadier than your nerves, you had better make your excuses at once, and sit you down in silence before it is too late.

She dressed, however, as usual, for the ordeal. I have my own suspicions that she took more than ordinary pains with her toilet. Of course when a sacrifice is to be made, it is no use to depreciate its value; and what daughter of Eve would wish to look her worst in the eyes of a man who was to see her for the last time? It was no difficult task to adorn Ada Latimer. She emerged from her dreary lodging fresh and radiant, as you may see a rose that has been raised by some floral enthusiast in a two-pair back, competing for fragrance and colouring with the pride of the garden. She took her place in her hired brougham with a gentle dignity that the finest lady in London might have copied, and the very reprobate who drove it ceased to ponder on the price of oats or the charms of beer, and felt himself a more humanised member of society while he had the charge of her.

She arrived late, as was her custom, and had only time to run her eye over her score and force her energies to the necessary pitch of resolution, when it was already her turn to

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sing. With a single rapid glance she had taken in the whole of that crowded assemblage, had distinguished *one* amongst the sea of faces, and had even discerned that it looked pale and careworn and unhappy. This was doubtless consolatory and reassuring. He had never supposed she could recognise him amongst the multitude. He had watched her narrowly since she entered, and could have sworn she never once looked up from the roll of music in her hand. But what is a man's glance compared to a woman's in the rapidity with which it takes in objects of interest? It is as the mole's to the hawk's; it is as the tedious roll of the waggon to the rush of the express train; it is as the parcel sent by post to the telegram flashing along the electric wires. She had seen the very flower in his buttonhole, and wondered whether it was the gift of Lady Gertrude; and he did not even think she knew he was there.

One more lightning-glance as she rose. Yes, he looked paler than ever now; and she soared away into a flood of melody so rich, so wild, so thrilling, as to draw down thunders of applause from the audience, and even marks of surprise and approval from the accustomed professionals. She heeded none of these. It seemed to her that she had been wishing that one listener a last farewell, and when she seated herself once more, it required all the fortitude and self-command that Ada could summon to avoid bursting into tears. She did not dare look at him again; she felt that if their eyes had met she must have given way. Mute and statue-like she sat through the rest of the entertainment, except where necessitated to take a part, which she did with the impassibility of an automaton—marble, cold, smoothed, polished marble outside; sore and bleeding and quivering within.

And yet she was sorry, too, when it was over; when the rooms were emptying fast, and people began to talk and greet each other, criticising the performances aloud, and it was time to go away. She had not known before how keenly she must have prized the chance of seeing him here for the last time; and now she had seen him and there was nothing more, Ada began to think that the blank certainty to which she had looked forward as such a relief was worse than all the hopes and fears, and jealousies and self-reproaches of her past conflict. Well, it was done at last, and there was an end of it.

A faltering step approached her as she reached her brougham. How could he tell that was hers amongst all the others? A manly hand that trembled visibly as it was

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put forward clasped her own, and a kind, sorrowful face looked down at her whilst she stammered out an incoherent greeting, and, with a woman's natural impulse for flight, ensconced herself in her carriage. Gilbert was no consummate actor, and, considering his opportunities, no experienced Lovelace; but I doubt if the highest histrionic powers and the profoundest knowledge of the sex could have availed him as did the simple sentence which told his misgivings and his regrets.

"I was afraid you had quite forgotten me. I began to think I should never see you again."

What was Ada's reply she never knew to her dying day. I think he might have got into the brougham then and there, and so driven away with her into Fairyland, and she would only have been too happy; but another carriage was waiting to come up; hers must move off or be annihilated, and my own impression is that neither of them spoke another syllable. Only as she turned the corner of the street he bowed to the fair face blushing as it leaned forward for another look; and although the gesture might but have been curiosity on her side and common courtesy on his, they felt they belonged to each other once more. So all the good resolutions vanished at one touch of a hand, at half a dozen words from a well-known voice; and there are people who can deliberately avow that one such minute (for these electric affinities require a very few seconds to combine) is an equivalent for weeks and months of longing and watching and weary misgivings and bitter mistrust. There are people calling themselves rational beings who can determine with all their energies that they will never speak to nor so much as think of each other again, that their mutual usage is unbearable, their injuries irremediable, their positive dislike at last insurmountable, and yet who can change as instantaneously as do the figures in a magic lantern; and because one hints "I haven't forgotten you," and the other whispers "I didn't mean to be unkind," can load themselves again with the fetters they had voted so galling, ten times heavier now, you may be sure, and rejoice exceedingly in their return to captivity once more.

The man who had been sixty years in the Bastille found his liberty so irksome that he prayed to be taken back to his cell, and died of a broken heart to learn that it had been destroyed. What was liberty to him? what is she to any of us? We make a great fuss about her, and erect statues to her, and prate about her being "the air we breathe—if we have it not, we die"; but we don't die, and we don't really care a pin about our liberty. What we like is a despotism—

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an iron despotism that we have raised up for ourselves, and we elect to grovel under it, and grumble at it, and hug our chains tighter and tighter the while. Yes, there is many a heart that incarcerates itself in a bastille of its own construction, till it owns no kindred with the outer world, and has no resource left but to break and perish with the ruins of its prison.

CHAPTER XXII

KEEPING AFLOAT

THE London season was now drawing to a close. Like the dying notes of a musical-box, gaiety after gaiety took place at longer intervals and with obviously failing energy. Shutters had begun to appear in the first-floor windows of well-known houses, and more than one scaffolding was already up for the repairs and decorations that should be completed against next year. The trees in the Park were acquiring that arid, uncomfortable, and thirsty look which none but London trees ever put on, and the young ladies still left were getting so pale and jaded that the philanthropist felt quite concerned lest their roses should never bloom again. Misguided man! He little knew what a fortnight's sea-breezes at Cowes could do, or a few quiet rides and drives about the shady country place with its out-of-door enjoyments and early hours, where papa assumed gaiters and a white hat once more, and mamma, always busy, rustled about in faded dresses and circumscribed crinoline, whilst self and sisters rejoiced in the broad brims and gardening-gloves of a coquetry none the less attractive for its apparent simplicity. Yes; a few showers of rain, a cooling breeze or two, soon bring back the bloom and the freshness to our English roses, always supposing there is no worm feeding at the core. But indeed it was high time to get them out of the dusty streets and squares to their own native flower-beds once more. Even the environs of London seemed to sympathise with the worn-out, dried-up, exhausted appearance of the metropolis. The grass in Richmond Park was burnt to a gamboge tint, whilst the frequent picnics of which beautiful Bushey had been the scene, left its smooth sward covered with broken bottles and brown paper. The Crystal Palace was no longer an attractive lounge for people warm enough already without the process of forcing under glass; and who, except ministers, would dine at Greenwich to eat whitebait half the size of mackerel? Verbena Villa, situated as it was

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at the other extremity of the Regent's Park, was not half far enough afield; and yet Bella often congratulated herself as the autumn drew on, that she lived *almost* in the country.

Behold her sitting quietly down to the household accounts, having gone through her usual routine of morning duties—that is to say, she has watered her plants, snipped off the dead leaves, drawn down the blinds, fed the parrot, and sat for ten minutes in a brown study, calculating how long it ought to take for a letter to come from Sydney, supposing it to be posted immediately on the arrival of a passenger who had only just sailed for that distant port. Miss Jones has become very thoughtful of late, and very economical. She endeavours constantly to reduce the large expenditure of the Villa to a more reasonable scale, and strives to dissuade her father as much as possible from those entertainments which he seems to think more than ever necessary since his late embarrassments.

"We must give another dinner-party, my dear, before everybody goes out of town," said the alderman, breaking in upon Bella's calculations, and flourishing the newspaper in a nervous manner that was now habitual to him. "Let me see; we've had the Bullingdons, and the Cheapsides, and old Mrs. Banneret and all her daughters, I think we needn't ask these again. Who is there still on the list, my child?"

"Oh, papa, I am sure we have done quite enough," was his daughter's reply; "it's getting too hot for large dinners now, and nobody expects to be asked so late in the season. People think we are gone to the seaside."

Rendered into English, this meant simply, "We are growing poorer every day; don't let us be extravagant, but accommodate ourselves gradually to the change that must come at last."

The alderman's temper, formerly so amiable, was getting captious. A man can bear ruin well enough when it has come, but the impending crash would make a saint peevish and irritable.

"Stuff!" he said. "I—met—Sir Andrew Lombard at Lloyd's yesterday, and he asked me half a dozen questions about this business of Slopes in Philadelphia. I must show him that such a fleabite as that cannot affect Jones and Co. Faith! he shall have as good a dinner here as he could get at the Mansion House. Put him down, Bella; put him down. Sir Andrew and Lady Lombard; and we'll have a sound man or two to meet them. There's Plumber, he can't be worth less than half a million; and Stirling Brothers, we'll have 'em

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both; and old Solomons the Jew, only no pork, Bella, mind that; the last time he dined here we had sucking-pig in the second course, and he ate the half of it before he found it out."

The girl came round to her father's chair, and seated herself on one of its arms, leaning her hand on his shoulder, and looking into his face with rising colour, and her eyes full of tears.

"Papa," she said, "I wish you would let me speak to you as I used to do. Dear papa, I am not so young now; I am nearly twenty; and I think I have as much sense as other girls of my age."

He began to look alarmed. What was coming? had she heard anything more of those losses which it had been his duty to keep secret from her? The bitterest drop, perhaps, in his cup was this gradual withdrawal of confidence between parent and child. Of course he spoke roughly, if not angrily, in reply.

"Speak away, Bella; only don't expect that you can play my hand without seeing my cards. Women can't possibly know anything about business; and it ought to be enough for you to have every earthly thing you can want, without even the trouble of asking for it. Don't cry, child; what's the use of that? Is there anything more I can give you? If there is, say so."

To tell a woman or a child not to cry, is to open the floodgates at once. Bella's tears began to fall thick and fast, but she stuck to her point nevertheless.

"Oh, papa," she sobbed out, "it's not that; I've all I want now, and a great deal more. Indeed, I could live upon a hundred a year with you, and be quite content, if I could see you happy. But you don't trust me, papa, now; you keep things from me; I am sure you do. If it hadn't been for John Gordon, I should never have known we were in difficulties at all; and now John Gordon's gone, and you've nobody but me."

And with this touching allusion, Bella lifted up her voice, and wept unrestrained.

The alderman was very uncomfortable. He soothed her and petted her as he used to do when she was a child, and had been naughty—no uncommon catastrophe; and more than once he resolved to take her into his entire confidence, and to tell her exactly how things stood, concealing neither the precarious position of the firm, nor the necessity for immediate retrenchment and economy; but the business habits

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were too strong within him. The natural instinct of the trader to keep up his credit, to save appearances, at least, as long as possible, forbade him to confess all, even to his child. He tried to turn the question off with a joke, but his voice was husky, and his laughter forced, as he replied—

“What a little goose it is! Do you suppose that ever since I’ve been in business I’ve had smooth water and a fair wind, and everything my own way? No, no, Bella; it’s just like a game at whist; sometimes we hold honours, sometimes we don’t, and must make the best score we can by our cards. If we catch the adversary revoking, we don’t excuse him the penalty; if we make a mistake ourselves, we don’t expect to get off scot free. A fresh deal may set everything right, Bella, and no man alive can have a better partner than mine. John Gordon’s one in a million, my dear; one in a million.”

Bella subscribed willingly to this encomium; but still she resolved to urge her scheme of retrenchment once more.

“But there’s no harm in saving, papa, surely, just now. I have been going through all these books over and over again till I know them by heart. There’s the grocer’s is extravagantly high, and the butcher charges a penny a pound more for his mutton than he did six months ago; and”—

The alderman interrupted her vehemently. This was more than flesh and blood could stand. To have lost thousands in Philadelphia by the shortcomings of Slopes; to have tens of thousands in jeopardy at Sydney by the incapacity of Newman and Hope, and then to be told that his butcher overcharged him a penny a pound! The alderman exploded—

“Zounds! child, don’t bother me about such nonsense. Pay the butcher and the rest of them as you used to do. Things must have come to a pretty pass indeed when Jones and Co. tax their bills for roast mutton, and can’t afford to give a dinner-party. Jones and Co., the safest house in Fleet Street! —Jones and Co.!”

“But, papa,” she pleaded yet once more, “surely, if we can’t afford it, we oughtn’t to do it. Surely, if we’re poor, it’s dishonest, and”—

“Silence, Bella!” roared the alderman, very angry indeed now, as well he might be, struck home by the truth-tipped shaft; “silence! and do as I bid you. There’s Mrs. Latimer coming in at the gate now. She’ll help you to write the invitations after luncheon; and don’t let me hear anything of this kind again!”

So the alderman bounced out of the room, and drove off straight to his counting-house, where he was very ill at ease

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the whole afternoon that he had spoken so sharply to his darling, and where the accounts in which he immersed himself did not tend, I fear, to restore the good-humour he had lost.

It was a relief to Bella to have Mrs. Latimer's gentle face smiling upon her after this uncomfortable scene. Ada looked to-day more lovely than usual. An inward glow seemed to brighten her whole countenance, and the blue eyes shone with a soft light that could only be kindled at the heart.

She was in good truth *very* happy—foolishly, exultingly, and certainly without adequate cause. When she asked herself why, she could not but acknowledge that her relative position was precisely the same as it had been a week ago. She was still Mrs. Latimer, giving music-lessons at the rate of so much per hour. Mr. Orme was none the less engaged to marry Lady Gertrude, that his love of harmony had led him to attend a public concert in the dog-days; nor was the end of the season, and his consequent departure, postponed an hour by their meeting of yesterday. And yet something within seemed to tell her that she was at last rewarded for all her suffering, and she was willing enough to believe it. I have heard it stated that one of the symptoms of incipient insanity is a tendency to view the same subject at different periods under a totally different aspect; to make light of the difficulty which an hour ago seemed insurmountable, or to shudder to-day at the chasm which appeared yesterday an exciting and pleasing possibility. If this be the case, a vast number of embryo lunatics must be still at large; and few of us but have experienced at one time or another this premonitory inconsistency of reason tottering on her throne.

The music-lesson was cut short, as indeed was often the case, Bella much preferring a quiet chat with her friend to the elaborate study of harmony for which that friend ostensibly visited her. There were a good many invitations to send, and the two ladies sat down to the task with considerable energy, previously muffling the parrot, so to speak, by placing a shawl over his cage.

"I suppose I must write in my own name to Lady Lombard," said Bella; "I never spoke to her but twice in my life. Each time she asked me how old I was, and if I could make a pudding! Such a woman, Mrs. Latimer! She'll come in a red velvet dress and a diamond necklace; I'm horribly afraid of her. Well, I must mind my spelling and choose a good pen. Then there are Stirling Brothers, as papa calls them. I think I had better 'present his compliments' to them; and

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old Mr. Solomons. Can you write Hebrew, dear? If so, you shall take it off my hands. You begin over the leaf, you know, and work backwards. It looks a little like music. Yes; I think I had better leave Mr. Solomons to you."

Ada smiled, and proceeded in a very businesslike manner to trace an invitation to Stirling Brothers in her delicate ladylike handwriting. It was not often such a missive reached the gloomy habitation of those merchant princes—the dusky firmament in which they sat enthroned, twin deities of commerce—the *lucida sidera* of the money-making world. Bella chattered on, busying herself the while with paper and envelopes, and admiring her friend's industry and composure.

"Papa must write to Mr. Plumber himself. He's an old friend, and very easily affronted. Besides, he's sure to come, for he never dines out anywhere but here. Do you know, Mrs. Latimer, I sometimes think"—

Here Bella stopped, looking wonderfully mysterious and full of fun, causing her friend to suspend her employment and inquire, not without curiosity, what it was she "sometimes thought."

"Well, of course, I don't know," answered Bella, now laughing outright, "and I've no business to say so; but he asked me last year if I shouldn't feel very dull in that dingy old house of his in Bedford Square; and twice since then he has said such stupid things and behaved so oddly, that I think—I think I might be Mrs. Plumber as soon as ever I liked."

"And don't you like?" asked Ada, looking up with the eager interest which all women betray in a match probable, possible, or utterly out of the question.

"You should see the man," replied the young scoffer. "My dear, he's as old as papa—and his boots creak, and he wears a wig and takes snuff. Besides, I believe he's very cross at home, though he's always so good-tempered here. No!—mine, when I have one, shall be younger and better-looking and nicer than old Plumber. Goodness! that just reminds me, papa said I was to ask Mr. Orme the next time we had anybody here."

Ada was bending studiously over the note to Stirling Brothers. At this juncture it seemed to require the closest attention, so that only a delicate little ear and a portion of her neck were visible under her soft hair. Probably it was the stooping posture that tinged the skin with so very deep a red. Bella looked a little surprised to receive no answer, and proceeded—

"I'm afraid to write to him myself; he's such a dandy, you

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know, and fine gentleman, though he's so good-natured. Besides, I shouldn't know how to begin or what to say. Dear Mrs. Latimer, couldn't you do it for me? He'd never know the difference of hand, and you might write as if it came from papa."

She was obliged to look up now, but the colour had faded away and left her very pale. She couldn't write to him: that was quite impossible; also it was quite impossible to tell Bella why; neither could she meet the black eyes of the latter, opened wide at her obvious confusion. It was an immense relief to hear a peal jingling at the door-bell. It was not quite such a relief when the footman threw the drawing-room door open and announced "Mr. Orme!"

There are many circumstances in life which draw largely on the composure and self-control of the human subject. It requires courage to stand up and be shot at by the riflemen of an enemy's corps, the while you are yourself bound to maintain for the encouragement of your followers such an outward demeanour of carelessness as though you were but the object of a pleasant joke—practical, perhaps, but humorous, and perfectly harmless. It demands no small assurance to address a public assemblage two-thirds of whom are prepared to cavil at your arguments, and the whole disposed to criticise your language, appearance, and general demeanour with anything but a favourable eye. It must shake the nerve of any but a professional to appear for the first time on the boards in the character of Macbeth, Coriolanus, or Hamlet the Dane,—but none of these—sharpshooter's target, unpopular orator, or amateur tragedian—requires half such *sang froid* to carry him through his ordeal as he who is unexpectedly ushered into the presence of his ladye-love to find her not alone.

Gilbert Orme had doubtless plenty of time to prepare himself for the interview. His arrival at this critical moment was the result of much forethought and the nicest calculation. He had allowed so much for the time of the music-lesson, so much for the necessary conversation of any two ladies at any given hour of the twenty-four, so much for the difference of clocks, and the result should have been his entrance at the gate of the Villa precisely when Mrs. Latimer was quitting it. He knew nothing, however, of the dinner-party and the invitations—nothing of the note that was to be written to himself; consequently he came ten minutes too soon. Of course he scarcely said a word to Mrs. Latimer; of course he made himself remarkably agreeable to Bella, though he would have been puzzled to repeat a single word of any sentence he

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addressed to her five minutes afterwards ; and of course the latter young lady, none the less observant that she herself knew the nature of such an innocent predilection, found out the two guilty ones in about five minutes and took her measures accordingly, thereby ensuring their gratitude and devotion for life.

“ Don't go, Mrs. Latimer,” said she, preparing to leave the room ; “ I must see the housekeeper before I can settle how many to ask ; and I want you to help me with the invitations afterwards. If you and Mr. Orme can amuse each other for a quarter of an hour, I will promise not to be a moment longer with Mrs. Garnish.”

So she vanished, and Ada held her breath, while Gilbert, feeling somewhat as he used when he hardened his heart for the Smite or the Whissendine, only much more nervous, made up his mind for the plunge.

CHAPTER XXIII

SINK OR SWIM

TWO little girls, with netted hair and innocent frilled trousers, are waiting meanwhile in a back drawing-room at Bayswater, and wondering whether their music-lesson is not to take place to-day. That kind, gentle mistress, who never scolds them, and so often brings them sugar-plums, has been hitherto punctuality itself. Wet or dry, she has never been five minutes late before; and now they watch the hand of the clock with increasing speculation, and broach the most improbable theories to account for her delay. Julia, the fickle, says to Charlotte, the steady one, that she thinks "Mrs. Latimer has been upset in a cab, and perhaps killed; in which case mamma will be very angry, and they will have no more lessons till a fresh teacher can be got—a holiday of at least a week!" Charlotte, as in duty bound, appears much shocked at so summary a disposal of their instructress, but suggests a milder fate, inclining to believe in bodily illness as the cause of her detention, or the death of a near relative, or sudden accession to untold wealth. Both, however, concur in deciding that under any circumstances "Mamma will be very angry." So they make up their minds without much difficulty to wait a little longer.

Ada meanwhile, still busying herself over the note to Stirling Brothers, feels as if she was suffocated, and as if her heart was beating so loud that Mr. Orme cannot but hear it. He is standing on the hearthrug, drawing lines on its surface with the point of his umbrella. How loud the clock ticks!—this silence seems so stupid, so awkward, so distressing! Yet how to break it? If it lasts thirty seconds longer she will jump up and run after Bella! The parrot makes a diversion just at the critical moment. Despising the artificial darkness in which he is enveloped, he gives vent to a startling whoop and an ear-piercing whistle, embarking forthwith in demoniacal tones on "Beautiful Venice, the bride of the——" Gilbert and Ada burst out laughing simultaneously. It is reassuring

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to hear their own voices, and the gentleman feels a considerable accession of that desperation which is the counterfeit of courage. The point of the umbrella, nevertheless, scores the hearthrug faster than ever.

"I am so glad to have found you here to-day," said he, at last; "I wanted so much to see you again before I leave London."

This was a bad start. Then he *was* going to leave town, probably forthwith. Ada's pride was in arms on the instant; she bowed haughtily, and answered in the coldest possible tones—

"I am generally here twice a week with my pupil; I have already exceeded the usual time of her lesson. As you are going away so soon, I am afraid I must wish you good-bye."

She rose as if to depart, and with another formal inclination turned to leave the room, but her heart smote her for this gratuitous unkindness, and she put out her hand. As he took possession of it, he bent till his forehead almost touched her glove; then raising his reproachful eyes to hers, he said very gently—

"Are you angry with me? What have I done to offend you? Will you not forgive me before I go away?"

There was something in his tone that filled Ada's eyes with tears; she did not dare look up lest he should see them; but she left her hand in his involuntarily, and kept her regard fixed firmly on one particular square of the carpet.

"Forgive you!" she said, in a very unsteady voice; "indeed, I have nothing to complain of. Ever since I have known you, Mr. Orme, you have been most kind and considerate. Indeed I wish you every happiness in your marriage, and congratulate you with all my heart."

One large tear that had been slowly gathering here fell with a splash—how provoking that she could not keep it back! How angry she was with herself! What *must* he think? What he thought I cannot tell—what he did was to imprison the hand he had never relinquished in both his own.

"My marriage!" he exclaimed; "I am not going to be married!—unless, unless—Mrs. Latimer, there is but one woman in the world to me—Ada!—may I not call you Ada?—are you blind? My own! my own! have you not seen it a long"—

Then out it came, the old, old story. In these cases, and these alone, the man does all the talking; and the *femme qui écoute*, with drooping head and averted eyes, and burning

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cheek and thrilling heart, drinks in every syllable without comment or interruption: and when the tale is told at last, be sure, would have no objection to hear it all over again. That Gilbert's question was one of those which required a definite answer seems sufficiently obvious, yet did it elicit no sort of reply. That he was himself satisfied with that eloquent silence which proverbially gives consent appears probable, for the umbrella lay neglected on the floor, and they both sat down again at no great distance apart; indeed a tolerably vigorous arm interposed between Ada and the back of her chair, while, despite the vociferous interruptions of the parrot, the soft whisper went flowing, flowing on; the music that was first heard in Paradise; the music of which thousands of years, and hundreds of languages, have never lost the cadence and the tune; the music that ravishes alike the sovereign on the throne and the peasant beneath the hawthorn tree; that stirs the blood of poor and dull as of gifted and noble; that gladdens the wise and good, and heavenward leads the hearts of earth's most wayward children. God help the forlorn one, for whom that strain is mute, that spell broken for ever!

By his own account, nobody had ever gone through so much to be alive. He spared her none of the particulars of their first introduction or their subsequent meetings, or the break-off in their intimacy, or his own misgivings, and anxieties, and final despair. The words came fast enough now with that beloved form so close, and the dainty head bent down till his lips almost touched its delicate little ear, and never a sign given of acquiescence or approval save a scarce palpable pressure of the hand he clasped. There are many ways of telling the old story, but their drift is pretty much the same, as there are many paths through the forests of Cyprus that lead alike to the temple on the sacred hill. Gilbert's was a straightforward account of all he had thought, done, and suffered. He confessed freely to having been charmed by others, but never subjugated; to having often admired, but never worshipped: nobody but Ada had ever made him unhappy before. And she was cruel enough to be gratified by this admission. Also, with all his regard for Gertrude, who was *like a sister* (here there was another faint pressure of the hand and a negative little shake of the averted head), he had no more dreamt of marrying her than the queen of Sheba. No; there was but one chance of happiness for him in this world; if that was to be his, there was no mortal he would envy upon earth.

SINK OR SWIM

If not, the sooner he was utterly lost and done for the better. Life was not worth having without it, for in good truth he was very, very, etc. etc. etc.

She had not spoken yet; indeed, she had never lifted her burning face to meet his regard. Now she looked up quickly for an instant.

“Who was that lady I saw you with at the opera?” she said; and Gilbert knew by the tone in which she asked the question that she loved him. So their eyes met at last, and—

It was rather unfortunate that Miss Jones should have reappeared at this juncture, which she did with more noise and bustle than was habitual to her, albeit not the quietest young lady in the world. Two of the *trio* thought Bella's quarter of an hour the shortest that was ever allowed. She herself, with a juster appreciation of time, esteemed five-and-forty minutes a sufficient period for the settlement of any question, however important, and considered the lovers had been together quite long enough. As my reader may probably be of the same opinion, I will only add that the little girls at Bayswater waited in vain for their music-lesson far on into the afternoon. Mrs. Latimer never came, and “mamma *was* very angry,” as Julia and Charlotte had predicted would be the result.

What a happy heart the music-mistress took home with her to that second-floor on the other side of the Edgware Road! What a paradise seemed the little dusky room, and how those roses on the chimney-piece bloomed with a fragrance unknown to “the gardens of earth and sea”! Though that crimson cheek bore the traces of recent tears, though ever and anon fresh drops welled up to quench the love-light in those lambent eyes, who would not wish to weep like this for very excess of joy? Who would not envy Ada Latimer, moving restlessly to and fro in the pride of her rich beauty, and the ecstasy of her new-found happiness? What though it was injudicious, foolish, unheard-of, impossible;—she would never injure him!—she would give him up willingly, cheerfully, thankfully, if it was for his own advantage. Anything for his sake! He loved her!—he loved her!—that was quite enough for her.

It is worth while to be steeped in visions such as these, if it be only for an hour. Let her dream on! the time of waking will come quite soon enough.

CHAPTER XXIV

TOM TIDLER'S GROUND

I AM Cockney enough to be very fond of Kensington Gardens. Where will you find pleasanter sweeps of lawn, or more umbrageous glades, or statelier trees, than about the hideous old palace? Indeed, were it not for the town itself, that part of the valley of the Thames in which London is situated seems to be naturally a very stronghold of sylvan beauty. There are glimpses of woodland scenery in Hyde Park, about the Powder Magazine, and near the Serpentine, fair enough to challenge competition with Windsor Forest itself; and there are also walks and retreats in my favourite Kensington Gardens, wherein you may dream away a summer noon, and fancy yourself hundreds of miles from the smoke of cities and the din of men. Probably you have never been there in your life before five p.m.; just as you have never seen the metropolis with its long perspectives, perfectly free from smoke, and all aglow in the flush of a midsummer's sunrise. Many a time have I perused it thus, both before and after my night's repose; and you may take my word for it, that our capital is no dirty, dingy, ill-favoured agglomeration of houses under such an aspect. But nine-tenths of its frequenters never see it save at its worst. Regular hours and conventional habits combine to deprive most men of at least a third of their lives, and they can only picture to themselves Regent Street as a noisy thoroughfare alive with splashed omnibuses at three in the afternoon, or a meretricious promenade flaring with lamps and libertinism at eleven at night, just as their ideas of Kensington Gardens are limited to the half-dozen smoke-blackened chestnuts and the circumscribed area of trodden sward surrounding the band of the Life Guards or the Blues.

And yet there is many a quiet walk and many a sequestered nook within those park-like precincts, fit resort for those who are of opinion that two is company and three is none. A pair are pacing thoughtfully to and fro under

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the shade of some large elms, and by the absorbed manner of the lady and the half-protective, half-deferential air of the gentleman, it would appear that they are one of those couples on whom Holy Church is about to bestow her blessing, rather than a fastly-riveted pair for whom hopes and fears are over, and the rushlight of Hymen burns with pale domestic lustre compared to the flaring torch of Love.

"But why not immediately?" asks the gentleman, flourishing an attenuated umbrella with considerable emphasis. "Why not make everything certain at once? and then I'll go to the end of the world, if you like, and come back again twice as fond of you, if possible, as I am now."

"Oh no!" said Ada, looking up at him with one of her soft, shy smiles, and thinking in her heart there never was anybody like him in the world. She always said, "Oh no!" to his ardent expressions of affection. Was it a sense of its priceless value, or was it indeed some foreboding of evil that thus made her decline and deprecate, as it were, the treasures he lavished at her feet?

"Oh no! that is not my object. Do you not yet understand my feelings—my pride, if you will? Listen to me, Mr. Orme—very well, Gilbert, dearest Gilbert; for indeed, come what may, you will always be very, very dear to me. Listen to me, and promise you will do what I ask you."

He gave the required promise with a sufficiently bad grace, and Ada proceeded in her gentle, persuasive tones—

"It is from yourself I would guard you, dear one; it is for your own welfare that I seem so heartless and unfeeling. You know you have promised me that you will never think me unkind. I have had experience; I know what life is; I have had sorrows, and struggles, and disappointments. You know I have been married before."

He fired up in a moment. Perhaps this retrospective jealousy is one of the most laughable absurdities of the whole delusion.

"I am not likely to forget it," he said bitterly. "So far you have certainly the advantage of me. *I* never cared for any but one; whereas you—I daresay you liked him far better than you do me."

She laid her hand upon his arm. That gentle touch could calm Gilbert in his wildest mood, and he was ashamed of his ungenerous speech the moment it crossed his lips.

"Hush!" she said, with a quivering lip; "never say that again. Do not be unreasonable—do not be angry with me. I would give my life to serve you, and welcome. I ask you

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for my sake to do what I wish. It is not such a very long time."

"Not a long time?" he pleaded; and it must have been no easy task to resist his entreaties. "A whole year, and you call it not a long time! Why, that fortnight nearly drove me mad; and now I am to go to the end of the earth, and never see you, or even hear from you, for twelve long months. You expect too much, Ada. I can't do it. After all, I have my feelings like other people."

"Do you think I have not considered them all through?" was her reply; "do you think I have not watched you and studied you till I know your character far better than you do yourself? Thin-skinned, impatient, injudicious, but as true as steel" (a smile chased away the listener's frown). "Supposing we were—were married to-morrow, however much you might regret it, I know you would never let me find it out. It is precisely for that reason I urge this step for my own sake. Gilbert, dear Gilbert, think what my feelings would be if I were not persuaded—convinced—in my own mind, that you had chosen me deliberately, advisedly, and on mature reflection. Would you like Lady Olivia to be able to reproach me that I had hurried her son into a *mésalliance* with a music-mistress?"

Even while she spoke Mrs. Montpellier's axiom rang once again in his ears—"You couldn't well marry a music-mistress." If ever Gilbert resolved in his own mind that he *would*, it was at that moment.

"If that is all," he burst out, "I won't hear of it for an instant. Am I not a free agent? Who is to dictate to me? Can I not choose whom I please?"

"Then we must put it the other way," she said, smiling playfully in his face. "You must do something to deserve me, sir. Like a knight of the olden time, you shall not win your ladye without an achievement. It sounds a vain speech, and yet I don't think you will be angry with me; but seriously, Gilbert, such an affection as I have to give—well, as I have given—is worth a sacrifice."

She certainly did not think he looked angry, and it seemed to Ada that no music she had ever made or heard sounded in her ears so sweetly as the voice in which he spoke.

"Do you really love me so much, Ada?"

"I mustn't spoil you," she answered, laughing off her emotion. "I must leave all that for the future. In the meantime, I will tell you what you shall do. Promise me that for a whole year you will never see me or write to me; that

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you will travel, exert yourself, improve your mind, and fit yourself for the high station in store for you. I know you have great talents. I should be sorry to see them thrown away in a life of idleness. I should like to see my—I mean one in whom I was interested—take a high place amongst men. I should like to see him envied, admired, looked up to. I could be very ambitious on his account, and so proud of him when he succeeded.”

“And when he failed,” said Gilbert, kindling at her enthusiasm, and smiling in the glowing face turned so frankly towards his own.

“It would be nicer still to cherish him, and console him, and make him happy at home,” was the womanlike reply.

Gilbert walked on a few paces in silence. Suddenly he crammed his hat down on his head, like a man who has taken his resolution.

“Then I’ll do it,” said he, “just as I would jump off the Monument, if you told me to do so for your sake. Yes, I’ll be off directly. I’ll follow John Gordon out to Australia; I’ll make myself acquainted with the colony. I’ll work hard, and be fit for Parliament when I come back. You shall be proud of my success, or comfort me for failure, Ada; one or the other I promise you. Next week I’ll go down to West Acres, and set my house in order. To-day I’ll see my mother and inform her of our engagement.”

The hand was laid on his arm once more.

“Stop,” she said; “not a word of that. There is no engagement on your side. You shall not pledge yourself to me. If you should change your mind at any moment, remember you are perfectly free.”

“And you?” he said quickly, looking rather alarmed.

“I am different,” she replied. “It is not likely that I should alter. Gilbert,” she added, stopping short in her walk, and turning rather pale, “I—I will never belong to anybody but you. Enough of this. Tell me when you will go. Let us talk of your plans for the future. After all, a year is not such a very long time.”

Perhaps her courage failed her a little now that it was settled. Perhaps having persuaded him, she was now a little scared at her success. What if he should change? What if this wonderful dream should turn out to be *but* a dream after all? Well, it was something to have dreamt it; and if *he* was happy she would never repine. With all their faults, and they have a good many, of which not the least is a tendency to rush constantly into extremes, they are not selfish these

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women. And they bear a bankruptcy of the feelings, an utter failure of all the hopes of a lifetime, better than do their sterner taskmasters. It may be that, as the subject more constantly occupies their minds, they more studiously prepare themselves for that catastrophe which seems to be the normal result of all *spes animi credula mutui*. Certainly the proverb about the course of true love must be of very general application. If every Jack has his Gill, it seems marvellous how seldom they descend the hill hand-in-hand. Can we account for the very few happy matches we see amongst our married acquaintance? Who is in fault? Jack, or Gill, or both, or neither? Perhaps if Hymen and Cupid could trot on together to the end of the stage, what with stuffed cushions and C springs, the journey would be too pleasant, and the passengers too unwilling to stop and rest when they came to the inn. The disinclination now is seldom from that cause; and neither mutual fitness, nor similarity of tastes, nor great personal and mental attractions on both sides, seem to be of the slightest efficacy in smoothing the ruts on the road. It was but half an hour ago I saw Tom Pouter and his wife start in the open carriage for what Mrs. Pouter's maid calls a "hairing." Tom is one of the best fellows in England. At the mess of the Royal Plungers, a regiment in which studious politeness amongst comrades is by no means exacted, it was proverbial that "nobody could get a rise out of Pouter"; his temper was as undeniable as his whiskers, his boots, his absorbent powers, or any other of the advantages on which he prided himself. From colonel to cornet, not a man but vowed he could spend a lifetime with Tom, and never have a wry word. Yet he looked cross, not to say sulky, this afternoon when he emerged on the Marine Parade, and leaned his body half out of their pretty little carriage, offering nothing but his left whisker to the contemplation of his angel wife. Could this be Mrs. Pouter's fault? Impossible! I remember her as Agatha Fantail, the sweetest girl I ever came across in my life. What did their French governess tell my cousin Frederic?—that "she couldn't have stayed in the family had it not been for the amiable disposition of Miss Agatha." I imagine indeed that old Lady Fantail *was* a bit of a Tartar. No doubt Mrs. P. is a kind mistress, an excellent mother; she often washes that spoiled little boy, and puts him to bed herself. A delightful member of society, and a most attractive person. I know more than one of my acquaintance who would esteem Pouter's place cheaply purchased at half

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his worldly all. And yet, you see, Tom can't bring himself to agree with these admirers. What a host of suitors Penelope had! Would any one of them have stayed away so long as did crafty Ulysses, without even the excuse of being detained by the sirens? Who knows?

The sea-breeze, a chat with a mutual acquaintance, and a happy remark of Tom's depreciating the attractions of a pretentious lady on the *pavé*, will restore good-humour, and the Pouters will return to dinner in harmony and resignation. Alas! that which should be the acme of human felicity is but a matter to make the best of!—and much I doubt that even now both of them *wish they hadn't*. Is it wiser to be a dry branch altogether? Is it better to think of the blue eyes smiling in heaven, all unaltered still, than to have watched them till they learned to flash with anger here, or, yet worse, freeze into cold indifference and scorn? Woe is me! I think I would fain have run my chance with the others. Might not mine have been the favoured lot—the one in a million—the prize amongst all those blanks? Again I say, Who knows?

To and fro they walked, and backwards and forwards they discussed the knotty point, with many a playful allusion and many a glowing vision, half-hinted, half-expressed. What can be more dull in detail than the conversation of such a couple?—what more absorbing to the colloquists? There are many pastimes at which it is very poor fun to be a looker-on, and theirs was indeed of engrossing interest to the players themselves. They settled it at last in this wise. Gilbert was to absent himself from England for a year, or at least for so much of a year as Ada considered a sufficient probation. He was to go to Australia; he was to occupy himself in every possible manner which could wean him from his one cherished idea. Above all, and on this point she was very firm—so much so as almost to anger him again—they were not to correspond. Also, the subject was to remain a profound secret from his family and from his friends. John Gordon, or any very intimate associate, he might take into his confidence, but only under strict promises of secrecy, and even this she would rather he refrained from. In short, every precaution must be taken to leave him totally unfettered and uncompromised. She would herself continue to earn her own livelihood by teaching music. On this point, too, she was obstinate, though she readily yielded to his wish that she should sing no more in public; and lastly, he was to depart forthwith, and they were not to meet again till his return.

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I believe he was fool enough to be a little hurt at this rigorous condition. I believe he did not see in it a consummate proof of the adversary's weakness.

Ada did not dare trust herself with these constant interviews. It was cruel work to have to bid him leave her, and to find him comply: so generously, so chivalrously, with such entire faith—it was more than she had expected even from *him!* Ada felt indeed that a succession of such victories would lead to a final defeat. She must wish him good-bye, once for all. She had something more to say; she had neglected it too often.

"You will make me one more promise?" she whispered, standing near the gate of the gardens with her hand in his; "one more promise—the surest of them all?"

"Anything—anything, for your sake."

"Not for my sake, Gilbert," she replied solemnly, "but for a higher motive. You must not think only of me; you must think of a better world than this, and hope to get there. You will, won't you?—you will try to be good. No; you mustn't stay any longer. Leave me here. I shall always like this spot better than any place in the world. There's your cab! how tired the poor horse must be of waiting in the sun. Well, only one more—there. God bless you, darling. Good-bye."

"You won't forget me, Ada?" he whispered, in a choking voice.

"*Never!*" was the pithy answer to so unnecessary a question.

I think he extorted "one more," and so was gone.

CHAPTER XXV

A NEW LEAF



HE cab-horse might or might not have been tired of waiting so long; he was suffered to proceed at his own pace in the direction of Belgrave Square. His master was indeed in no mood to interfere. Bodily he was gliding through the Park at the rate of twelve miles an hour; mentally he was still walking with his Eve in Paradise. In what different aspects does the garden of Eden present itself to different minds, nay, to the same imagination at different times. Five acres of gorse in the heart of a grass country, a good brook in the distance, and all the gates locked; or a deep corrie on the broad shoulder of Ben-i-Voord, with the naked bluffs of granite peeping out through the blushing heather, and the deer feeding so still to windward, while the dull roar of a distant waterfall mingles with the moan of the mountain breeze on his ear; or again, the giddy water cutting itself against the tight-strung line, and its backward swirl in yon steel-grey pool, dulled like a dim breastplate by the cloudy sky and the feathery weeping birches, under which it runs a rich clear amber, and the pebbly shallow below the alders, where he hopes to land that silvery ten-pounder with whom he wrestles not in vain. Each of these scenes had been to Gilbert, at various epochs, the perfect antitype of his Elysian fields. Now it was a hundred yards of sward and a noted elm-tree, some rhododendrons, a stagnant pool, and a hideous red-brick house beyond. I often think there must be no such thing as reality; that all depends on the glasses we look through. Alas, alas! when they are green or blue!

As his first step in that course of moral improvement to

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which he now aspired, Gilbert had resolved to pay a filial visit in the Square. Although he was to preserve inviolable secrecy as regarded his ladye-love, he meant to break to his mother his speedy departure for the Antipodes—an announcement he was persuaded, not without good reason, she would receive with edifying resignation. Lady Olivia had lingered in London longer than was her custom. She was going to the seaside: she hated a watering-place—the only point on which I cordially agree with her ladyship—and therefore put off the evil hour as long as possible. As her son's cab rolled up to the door, she and Lady Gertrude were busy packing—a process, I may observe, *en passant*, that the weaker sex seldom leave unrestrictedly to their servants. Gentlemen desire their valets to put up their things, and trouble their heads no more about the matter; ladies inspect their own delicate preparations with the strictest scrutiny. Also, like wild partridges, after their flights, it takes them a considerable time to settle.

His mother received Gilbert with a frown, the result of her travelling preparations, which did by no means soften into a maternal smile at the greeting of her son.

“What, Gilbert!” she said, coldly enough, extending him two fingers to shake; “I certainly did not expect *you*. I thought you had gone out of town. I have not seen you for three weeks.”

He felt the reproach was not undeserved.

“Mother,” he answered, “I am afraid I have been very negligent. I came here on purpose to tell you so; to ask your forgiveness for much that may have offended you. I am sorry to have been wanting in my duty towards you. Make friends with me before I go.”

Lady Olivia could not but be gratified at so submissive an avowal, be softened by this unlooked-for humility. She could not enjoy her triumph, however, without displaying it. This was too good an opportunity to be missed of reading her prodigal son a lecture. So she sat down in her own especial arm-chair, and began in her haughtiest tones—

“I have never complained of your conduct towards me, Gilbert, nor have I expected anything else from you now, for a good many years. I am glad to find that you have been at last brought to see the error of your ways. Better late than never. Perhaps for the future you will no longer consider my advice utterly valueless, or think it derogatory to consult me upon your plans and movements. May I ask when do you go, and where?”

A NEW LEAF

"This week certain, mother," was his reply; "I am going direct to Australia."

Even Lady Olivia was startled.

"To Australia!" she repeated; "it's a voyage of months! My child, I might never see you again!"

And for the first time for years she drew him towards her and kissed him on the forehead.

"And therefore, mother, you must think kindly of me whilst I am away," he urged. "When I come back, things will be very different, I hope. I am going to turn over a new leaf; I shall live a great deal more at West Acres. I shall try and be a useful member of society. In the meantime, I shall not see you again for a whole year."

She remembered how his father had once spoken to her almost to the same effect, how he had wished once for all to put matters on a happier footing between them. It was not long before the late Mr. Orme took to drinking so sadly, and, indeed, was the last confidential communication they had ever held. She had hardened herself against her husband then, she would not harden herself against her son *now*.

"You have got into some scrape, Gilbert. You are forced to leave the country! tell me what it is. I will assist you if it is in my power; at least I know my duty as a mother."

At this moment of impending reconciliation, when his mother for the first time appeared willing to treat him as a son, he felt sorely shackled by his promise to Mrs. Latimer. It was not to be thought of that he could break it. A promise, especially a promise to Ada, must indeed be held sacred. He hesitated, he murmured, he came to a dead stop altogether. Lady Olivia was more than ever offended.

"This is a bad beginning," she said, "of your promised amendment. You are going to alter your whole life, you tell me. You are on the eve of a long voyage to the other end of the world, and I—your mother—am not to be informed of the cause. Excuse me, Gilbert, I have no desire to intrude upon your confidence; perhaps your cousin may have more influence with you than your mother."

She got up, rang the bell, desired the servant to "send and let Lady Gertrude know that Mr. Orme was here and wished to see her immediately"; then, coldly shaking her son once more by the hand, merely added a wish for good weather on his account, and a formal good-bye, with which ceremonious farewell she walked out of the room as Lady Gertrude came into it, and thus Gilbert lost the chance of being reconciled to his mother.

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"What's the matter now?" asked his cousin with a saucy smile, as she greeted him in her usual cordial manner; "Aunt Olivia looks as black as thunder; and you, too, to judge by appearances, seem to have been getting the worst of it. What have you been saying to her, you wild, good-for-nothing boy? and why haven't you been near me to be lectured for so long? You look different yourself, too, to-day, Gilbert; what has happened?" she added anxiously.

Gertrude had become more familiar than ever with her cousin of late. She petted him, and scolded him, and ordered him about with the caprice of a spoiled child. Yet was it such a familiarity as I do not think Mrs. Latimer would have minded in the least. Beyond a certain point mutual liking seems to promote mutual reserve. If the Koh-i-noor was yours or mine, we should not advertise the world of its possession; we should never look at it without a secret thrill of triumph, none the less keen that it was dashed with a misgiving lest the gem should be lost, or stolen, or depreciated by those who envied our lot. We should not paw it about, and parade it, and wear it on Sundays in our shirt front. The heart is with the buried treasure, and not with the golden image set up like "an ensign on a hill." Gertrude, I say, treated her cousin as a brother, now that John Gordon was gone to Australia.

"I shall be at sea this day week," said Gilbert; "I am going to follow a friend of ours out to Sydney."

She looked up very grave.

"Nothing has happened," she said; "you have had no time to hear. Why are you going?"

"I want change of scene," he answered vaguely; "I am tired of Scotland, and Brussels, and the eternal round of German watering-places, each exactly like the other. I should like to see Australia. I should like to be out there with John Gordon."

Lady Gertrude looked very well when her countenance softened, as it did now; the fault of her aristocratic beauty was a certain impassibility of features and sharpness of outline. Like a level landscape, it was all the fairer for melting in a summer haze.

"How good of you," she said, clasping his hand, "how like you! God bless you, Gilbert; you are a true friend."

Recent circumstances had considerably sharpened Gilbert's perceptions; he laughed rather meaningly as he asked—

"Can I take anything out for you, Gertrude? Kind messages and all that, or bring anything back?"

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He was looking straight into her clear dark eyes, and Lady Gertrude blushed deeply, a proceeding which rather strengthened her cousin's suspicions than otherwise. I do not think she gave him any positive messages to take out to Sydney, nor exacted from him a promise that he would bring anything very particular back; but she talked with him for an hour with ever-increasing interest of the colony and all belonging to it. And when she did take leave of him, it was affectionately, gravely, almost solemnly, for she thought of the long absence, the tedious voyage, and the distant shore. You see, she liked Gilbert very much; they had been brought up together almost on the terms of brother and sister; and her manner on this occasion was as different as possible from that in which she had wished John Gordon a flippant farewell.

So Gilbert sailed for the Antipodes, *because* he had lately discovered that there was something in England dearer to him than all the rest of the world besides; and Lady Gertrude, when her cousin was fairly embarked in pursuit of his friend, felt easier in her mind than she had been ever since she expressed to that friend a considerate wish for his *bon voyage!*

My little playfellow from school lost one of his arrows t'other day amongst the long grass in the meadow behind the home farm; the urchin fitted another shaft forthwith, and from the same place took a roving shot in the same direction. By following up the last he found both. Cunning little archer! if it is well to have two strings to your bow, it is also not amiss sometimes to have two arrows to your string.

Part II

"I fruitless mourn to him that cannot hear,
And weep the more because I weep in vain."

CHAPTER XXVI

OVER THE WAY



DAZZLING sky, a clear warm atmosphere tempered by a breeze, grassy plains alive with quails and paroquets, and rich in knee-deep verdure, undulating slopes crowned by waving woods aglow in the mellow sunlight, and far away, beyond and above all, a strip of deep blue sea. Such is the scene I would fain call up, a scene of Australian splendour, of sylvan beauty, of wild adventurous associations, and yet, with its distant glimpses of ocean, a scene reminding those who

looked upon it of their home.

When the Dutch boër, toiling with his lumbering vehicle and his span of weary oxen towards Capetown, comes at last in sight of the sparkling African sea, he lights a fresh pipe with fresh satisfaction, and pointing exultingly towards that distant gleam, exclaims, "Behold the Englishman's waggon-path!" and the Dutch boër, albeit a person of sluggish apprehension, and no very brilliant imaginative powers, is in this instance right. Whoever has been much in a foreign land, and has felt, as the absent are prone to feel, a weary longing for home, must remember the welcome with which he instinctively greeted the friend that, if ever he got there at all, was to bear him to his own shores, must remember how the sight of the sea alone was like the sound of a national strain, how to be under the Union Jack was the next thing to seeing the white cliffs once more.

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Stretching away at the best pace a wiry little Australian horse, held hard by the head, can command, rides an Englishman in the normal state of hurry peculiar to his countrymen in every land but their own. He has time, nevertheless, to feel his heart thrill as he catches a glimpse of that distant sea, but he is also too thorough a Briton to allow any consideration on earth to divert his attention from his present occupation, no less engrossing a business than the chase.

Many months have elapsed since I left Gilbert Orme at the gate of Kensington Gardens, in far worse plight, to his own thinking, than was ever his father Adam, for the latter, though driven from their Eden, took his Eve along with him. Many a month of adventure and excitement has passed over his head. The outward man has grown brown, robust, and prosperous-looking. A deep abiding happiness stamps its presence on the features as unerringly as does the endurance of a continuous affliction, but the glowing effects of the former are as becoming as those of the latter are the reverse. There are no haggard, anxious lines about Gilbert's eyes and mouth now, while his smile, always so sweet, has gained a frank joyousness which it did not display in London. A silken and abundant beard adds to the manliness of his appearance, and hides his chin, which is the worst feature of his face. In that rough shooting-dress, with a gaudy handkerchief flying loose about his throat, I question if Lady Olivia would recognise her son; yet is he all unaltered in mind, and even now, speeding along after those gaunt kangaroo dogs, the presence of Ada seems to pervade the whole atmosphere of beauty and fragrance around him. Ada is in the rustling breeze—the glowing woods—the sunny upland slopes—the smiling sky—above all, the distant strip of deep blue sea.

It is rare galloping ground, though somewhat hard for legs and feet of less enduring materials than the Australian horse possesses, and the pace, as Gilbert would have called it in Leicestershire a twelvemonth ago, is sufficiently good to satisfy even that reckless and exacting horseman. A leaping brown object, about two hundred yards ahead of him, is bounding rapidly away downhill, disposing of all intervening obstacles, such as underwood, fallen timber, broken ground, and dry watercourses, with extraordinary facility; but those two large, rough, lean dogs are gaining on it nevertheless at every stride, and Gilbert's eager little horse is pulling hard at its rider, and spinning after them as if he, too, would fain have a share in the spoils. Here and there a huge tree lying prostrate and half concealed by the luxuriant verdure, offers

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no mean obstacle to encounter at a flying leap, but the little bay horse gathers himself with the quickness of a cat for the effort, and landing like a deer, is in his stride and away again without loss of time, and with ever-increasing energy. The rider who urged Mouse so resolutely to his downfall twenty years ago, has gained strength and experience now. Wherever a horse can go—be it across the stretching pastures, and over the formidable ox-fences of Leicestershire—be it through the dense underwood and athwart the “apple-tree flats” of Australia—Gilbert Orme is the man to ride him; not only to sit on his back and allow himself to be carried like a sack of potatoes or a hundredweight of coal, but to *ride* him and make the most of him every yard he goes. He is close to the kangaroo dogs, cheering them on their game even now.

“Yooi, over, Gilbert! that’s a rum one!” cries a cheery voice behind him, as the little bay horse clears a fallen trunk as high as a fair-sized gate. “Forward! forward!” adds the speaker, pointing ahead to a flat, verdant glade up which the dogs are stretching at a killing pace, near their now flagging game; and John Gordon, gaining a few yards on his friend by a judicious turn, comes up alongside.

“Five minutes more, and we shall run into him,” he shouts, sitting well back on his horse, and urging him to his extreme pace, “when he ‘blobs’ like that he’s getting beat. See how Canvas sticks to him, and the yellow dog hangs back waiting for the turn.”

While he speaks, a subdued sparkle in John’s black eye shows that he, too, is not insensible to the excitement of the sport. There are some men on whose exterior change of climate, life, or habits, seems to make no impression; whose persons, like their minds, are superior to extraneous circumstances, and of this class is John Gordon. Clean shaved is he, here in the wild Australian bush, as he used to be in the Fleet Street counting-house; and although he has discarded the black hat and coat of civilised life, or rather I should perhaps say those articles of dress have discarded their wearer, his habiliments have none of the picturesque variety in colour and fashion which distinguishes those of his friend. His clear olive-tint is perhaps a thought clearer and deeper under this burning sun that has tanned his comrade so rich a brown, but the crisp, black locks sit as close to the head as if they had but just emerged from the Burlington Arcade, and his well-cut jaw is rather defined than concealed by the short curling whiskers. John has been working hard in Sydney for months, astonishing, sometimes disgusting, the old stagers, by

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the quick apprehension he shows for affairs of trade, and making himself thoroughly master of details in a few weeks, with which it took them as many years to become familiar. Newman and Hope looked upon him as a prodigy in the mercantile world. That firm has not been accustomed to see the keenest talents for business combined with a soldierlike rapidity of thought and action, and the manners of an accomplished gentleman. Also they have more than once tried to contest some of John's arrangements, and found themselves, without knowing why, worsted in the attempt. Altogether, Mr. Gordon has rather astonished the good people at Sydney than otherwise.

It was with considerably more energy than his wont that he greeted Gilbert's arrival at the Antipodes. I need not now observe that John was by no means a demonstrative gentleman, yet could he be sufficiently cordial on occasion, and even his self-command could not conceal his delight at Orme's unexpected appearance with the latest intelligence from the Square. Since then they have been constant associates; the man of business sharing his hours of relaxation with the man of pleasure, the latter by all means in his power, and with considerable assistance from his friend, studying to acquaint himself with the resources of the colony, preparatory to that public life on which he has determined to enter because Ada wishes it.

In the meantime, both are enjoying a fortnight's expedition into the bush; and after a long day's draw, they have had an undeniable gallop with a kangaroo.

Three minutes more of thrilling excitement, a scramble through a dried-up watercourse—a crowner for John, whose horse goes shoulder-deep into a hole—a shrill English "Who-whoop!" and our sportsmen are standing by their reeking steeds, whilst Gordon, as the more experienced of the two, draws a glistening hunting-knife, and filling a short black pipe with cavendish, proceeds to take upon himself the obsequies of the prey. Gilbert pulls out his watch—

"Eighteen minutes," says he, "from find to finish, and best pace every yard of the way!"

The horses, with drooping heads and heaving, in-drawn flanks, attest the severity of the gallop. John meanwhile, with upturned sleeves, is demonstrating his thorough knowledge of woodcraft, in one of its departments on which it is unnecessary to dwell. He looks up from his work—

"Equal to the Quorn," says he, "for pace and distance."

"With almost as much jumping," remarks his friend, patting

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the bay-horse's dripping neck, and thinking what a rare cover-hack that game little animal would make him in England.

"And the advantage of six feet of venison at the finish," adds the carver, wiping his blade on the grass; "we must have had short commons to-day if it hadn't been for this fellow. Rather think I shall astonish you when we camp, and I show you what 'steamer' is!"

Indeed, they were rather short of provisions. In anticipation of a separation from their servants, they had with them a few ounces of tea, some tobacco, and a ration or two of pork and flour; but a haunch of kangaroo venison was likely to prove no mean addition to this humble fare, as John emphatically observed the while he packed it behind his saddle, ere they remounted their jaded horses to look for water in the vicinity of which they might camp.

The sun was going down as they reached one of those fluctuating rivers, called in Australia "creeks," which, full of water and rushing in one mighty torrent towards the sea to-day, are perhaps to-morrow dried up into a succession of isolated pools fast waning into hopeless aridity. Once there, they unsaddled rapidly, turned their horses to graze, having first hobbled them, a somewhat unnecessary precaution, until they should have recovered their fatigues; and then proceeded with infinite labour to collect enough fallen branches to make a tolerable fire. They had only their hunting-knives for this purpose, and for cooking utensils possessed nothing but a certain iron pot, from which John never parted, and which, indeed, with its close-fitting lid, formed the receptacle of all their luxuries, and a tin mug that hung at Gilbert's belt. With such insufficient accessories, our two gentlemen from St. James's Street were now quite old enough campaigners to furnish an excellent meal.

It was well they were so, for their "coo-ey" call—so termed from the distance at which a shrill enunciation of those syllables can be heard—was never answered; and indeed their spare horses and servants must have been some thirty miles or more distant from them in a direct line through the bush.

At length their preparations were made. The fire burned up, the pot was on to boil; the flour kneaded into a heavy dough, was placed to bake in the ashes, until the tough mass should have acquired the consistency that entitled it to its appropriate name of damper. Gilbert's mug was made a teapot for the occasion; and the two friends, thoroughly wearied, lit their short black pipes, and reclined against their

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saddles, watching with considerable satisfaction the cooking of a savoury mess which was to constitute their meal. The horses were grazing assiduously in their vicinity; and the stars coming out one by one.

"Nothing like steamer," observed John, knocking the ashes from his pipe, and removing the lid of the pot to give its contents a good stir with his hunting-knife, the same weapon which had inflicted its *coup de grâce* on the kangaroo.

"Not to be despised," answered his friend, shovelling a liberal portion on a piece of bark that served him for a platter. "I never could eat a haggis in Scotland, but when it is made of kangaroo and salt pork, it is food for the gods. A little bit more liver, John, and a pinch of powder. As usual, we have forgotten the salt! Give us a drain of tea if it's drawn. As Holyhead says after a magnum, a child might play with me now!"

So they ate and drank as men can only eat and drink who are all day taking severe exercise in the open air, and who sleep with no lower roof over their heads than the starry heaven; and then, with the smoking mug of tea set equitably between them, and the pipes alight once more, they settled down to a quiet chat about "home."

"We will go back together, Gilbert," said John, in his short decided tones. "A few weeks more will teach you all you are likely to learn about the colony, unless you came and settled here for good. I don't think it would suit you as well as West Acres. My business will soon be wound up with Newman and Hope, then we'll hoist Blue Peter at the fore, up anchor, westward ho! and away!"

"I am very glad I came," said Gilbert dreamily, between the puffs of his pipe.

"So am I," rejoined the other; "it has done you a world of good, depend upon it. For myself, I don't object to the colony; and if I hadn't been here, I fear we should have saved but little out of the fire. *Aide-toi, et Dieu t'aidera.* We've had a facer, though, and I am very glad I came, too!"

"Is it a complete smash?" asked Gilbert, rousing from his abstraction. "The poor alderman! how will he bear it?"

"He has enough left not to starve," replied the junior partner, "and that is more than can be said for some. I do not pity a man much who has been always in business. The alderman has had a good time enough, and a long day. This could not have been avoided, and was one of the chances that must be run with large returns. I am sorry for Bella."

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"And yourself?" put in his friend.

"I've lost ten years of my life, according to my calculation," replied John. "It's against me, but what then? You've seen a fellow climbing a pole at a fair, Gilbert! He swarms up to the six feet of grease at the top, gains an inch at a time, stops, gives way, and slides down by the run. What is the next move? To stand by and whine, giving up the leg of mutton altogether? Not a bit of it! He puts fresh sand in his hands, and at it again! *Mox reficit rates*, you know; and with Dame Fortune as with her sex, 'one refusal no rebuff.'"

He spoke quite calmly and confidently, also with something of contemptuous indifference, which was rather provoking; and this loss of capital, as he truly observed, was to John the loss of ten years of life, perhaps of all that was best worth living for. The fruit for which he thirsted would not surely hang for ever up there on the bough! Over-ripe, might it not fall to the ground? Or might not another with longer reach come and pluck it whilst he was making his ladder? And now, half a dozen rounds were broken at once, and he must go to the bottom and begin again. Well, no good ever came yet of complaining! He would set about mending them in silence. But what if the ladder should not be finished till too late? John suffered and bled inwardly so to speak, and could not always shut out the whispers of the fiend who vexed his ear, and who is so fond of asking *cui bono?*

"Let me help you," said Gilbert earnestly; "I am well off; I have plenty of money. At least I can *borrow* as much as we want. You and I are old friends, John; don't be proud! Besides, you know, I would do anything for the good alderman."

John smoked on in silence, his keen eye resting on his friend. It was quite dark now save for the fire over which they sat. John's face was habitually impassible as marble. It must have been the flickering of that wood fire which cast such successive shades over its surface. It was a full minute before he spoke.

"You were always a good fellow, Gilbert," said he, "but you are an altered man of late. Forgive me for speaking so freely. I would rather be under an obligation to you *now* than ever, if I felt I understood you, but I don't. Never mind. You're improved: that's all right. And as for help, I daresay I should come to you fast enough if I wanted it."

For all his honesty this was hardly a straightforward speech of Mr. Gordon's. If he wished to find out anything,

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why did he not ask point-blank, as was his custom? Was he, too, one of those who must needs beat about the bush? Was there a sacred grove in any forest on earth round which he hovered and hankered, not daring to enter in? Gilbert leaned his head back against his saddle, looking upwards into the starry night. He was indeed an altered man for the nonce, and a happy one. Also he felt an intense longing to proclaim his happiness, to pour out some of the new fancies which kept thronging his mind. He was so far from her, too: it would be an immense delight to talk about her. He had indeed mentioned her name once or twice in a studiously careless manner, and had been disappointed to find that his part was so well acted as to raise not the slightest suspicion in his comrade's breast, who took no more notice of the magic syllables than if they had spelt the patronymic of his wet-nurse. He had a great mind to unbosom himself then and there, but he remembered Ada's wish that all confidence should be avoided; so he adopted a middle course, and propounded one of those dreamy sentimental questions it is so impossible to answer.

"What do you suppose they are, John?" said he, pointing upwards with the stem of the short black pipe; "worlds, or what? And do you think that people who like each other here will be together hereafter up there?"

It was so unlike a speech of Gilbert's that John stared at his recumbent friend in utter consternation. Once more the fire flickered up and threw a shade as before across his dark face. A dingoe, too, or native wild-dog, attracted by the smell of the "steamer," had prowled to within a few yards of their bivouac. His shining green eyes were alone visible. John took a blazing log from the fire, and a shower of sparks flying about just behind where the green eyes *had* been, attested the accuracy of his aim. Then he sat down again, and spoke in scornful tones.

"What would they do with each other up there, if they did meet? There are no politics, or field-sports, or money-making for the men; no smart dresses and shopping and scandal for the women. They would all of them find the star very slow, depend upon it. Do you believe in Platonics, Gilbert? Do you think one fair spirit for your minister would be enough after a liberal honeymoon, say of a couple of hundred years? Don't you think she would call in other spirits worse than herself to see how they were dressed? and you would be very glad to welcome anything that should break the *tête-à-tête*. What has come to you, man?"

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"This has come to me," answered Gilbert, rousing up with unusual energy, "that I've wasted the best part of my life, and only found it out of late—that I am happier far than I used to be, because I *know* now that a man is not put into this world only to amuse himself—that his duty is to make the happiness of others—to take his share in the great scheme, and enjoy the wages he earns with the sweat of his brow—to work in the fields all day with his fellows, and rest in his own garden at sunset—that's my lesson, John; I thank God I've learnt it, and I bless the person who taught it me."

I think my boy was very *nearly* right. It is not well, saith the philosopher, to examine too closely into motives, yet what was it but the motive that in his case made all the difference between lost and found?

John Gordon would have liked much to inquire the name of the teacher who had been taking such pains with his friend, but his lips were set so firmly together that the question never escaped them; and it was in bitterer tones than usual that he resumed the conversation.

"Then you mean to sell the horses, and abjure the vanities of life; turn country gentleman, grow turnips, and mind the poor and the poachers. Quite right, old fellow; and you deserve credit for it. You are not obliged to do anything but mischief in right of your station. Well, it's no credit to me to work, because it's my trade. So you will have it all. Honour and happiness, and a good conscience, and a balance at your banker's. I wish you joy; it's a strong position. Votes and interest; flocks and herds, ay," he added inaudibly, between his set teeth, "and the poor man's ewe lamb into the bargain."

Now this was very unjust of John Gordon, if, as I shrewdly suspect, his departure from his customary reticence was owing to a misgiving that a certain young lady at home had been putting her cousin through a course of elementary instruction in ethics. Nor, indeed, was his metaphor peculiarly apt, inasmuch as the most pastoral of her admirers would scarcely have designated Lady Gertrude a "lamb" of any description.

"There are better things than flocks and herds," quoth Gilbert, apparently following out the thread of his own reflections; ay, than votes and interest, silver and gold, houses and land. I don't mean learning, I don't mean fame. I can fancy circumstances under which I should be thankful and happy to work all day long with a spade for my daily bread. I can fancy two rooms and a pigsty looking brighter than

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Ormolu House. Hang it! old fellow, I know I can depend upon you. I've a great mind to tell you something."

John Gordon would have known it all in two more minutes; the cup of his friend's happiness was running over, and the drops, be sure, would have neutralised all the bitterness of his own. But as he turned his face from the firelight to hearken, an exclamation of surprise rose to Gilbert's lips. He jumped to his feet, and bade his comrade listen.

"It's a horse's tramp, I'll swear," said he, *arrectis auribus*; "and mounted, too, by the regular pace. How the fellow rides! He'll be into our camp neck-and-heels if we don't holloa. Give him a 'coo-ey,' John. You do it better than I can."

In effect John's shrill call was answered by a similar sound close at hand; and a wavering mass made its appearance, looming very large and indistinct in the darkness, while a hoarse, cheerful voice shouted out—

"Hold on, like good fellows! Don't shoot! there are no bushrangers hereaway; and you're Englishmen, I can tell by the camping of ye!"

His horse gave a sob of contentment, as half the mass dismounted, heavily and wearily, like a man who has had about enough. The next instant brought him out in full relief as he stepped into the red glare of the firelight.

CHAPTER XXVII

AN UNBIDDEN GUEST

THERE is small ceremony in the bush. The new-comer accepted a proffered mug containing about a quart of smoking tea, and took a hearty pull at its contents. John Gordon pushed him down into his own seat by the fire, and put the remains of the "steamer" on to warm up again; while Gilbert unsaddled the tired horse, led him to water, and then turned him loose to graze. There are different codes of politeness in different situations, but a welcome everywhere seems to consist in offering a guest meat and drink. It does not take long for a man to settle himself who has ridden a tired horse from sunrise to sunset. A pocket-comb is soon run through the hair and beard; and by the time the new arrival had emptied mug and platter, and filled a short pipe from his own sealskin pouch, he seemed to feel very sufficiently at home.

Fresh logs were thrown on the fire, which blazed up gloriously, throwing a thousand fantastic shadows on the surrounding trees, and shedding a glare on one of the horses wandering ghostlike about the camp of his masters. The night was very soft and calm, the stars shining with a golden lustre peculiar to the southern hemisphere, and a light air ever and anon rustled the dense foliage, as if the leaves stirred in their sleep and hushed off again quieter than before. Occasionally the stamp and snort of a horse, or the champing of his jaws as he cropped the moistened herbage, broke the surrounding stillness; but even such casual interruptions seemed only to enhance the prevailing silence of the night. For a while the three men smoked on without speaking. Two of them were loth to disturb the soothing influence of the hour; the third was in all the physical enjoyment of rest, repletion, and tobacco. At length he puffed forth a volume of smoke with a sigh of extreme satisfaction, and turned towards his entertainers.

"Gentlemen both!" said he, putting the mug of tea to his

AN UNBIDDEN GUEST

lips and feigning to drink their healths, "a good job for me that I came across ye. It's no joke, even in these fine nights, camping out in the dark, without a morsel of prog or a drop to drink, and the 'baccy nearly done besides. It's the right stuff too, is that in the sealskin; try it. What is life but a vapour? and is not 'baccy the staff thereof?"

There was no disputing such self-evident propositions; and as their guest seemed a free-and-easy, communicative sort of gentleman, it was natural to inquire of him whether he had come a long distance since sunrise.

"No dead reckoning here," was his reply: "if you asked my horse he would say yes, for before the sun went down he could hardly wag. Yet he was a thundering good bit of stuff this morning, and now I guess he's as crisp as a biscuit. Well, strangers! it's a long lane that has no turning, but I did think for five minutes before I saw your fire that it was about U.P.; and I haven't been reared altogether on white meat and milk diet neither. Some of the lily-handed ones would say I was a roughish customer. What's your opinion, gentlemen?—there's no charge for looking."

He was a roughish customer in appearance, no doubt; and yet the man had something of the tone and manner of one who had lived in good society. Nothing could be less sumptuous than his apparel; a red flannel shirt, becoming crimson in hue; a grey frieze jacket, patched and darned; leather trousers that, like the chameleon, had taken the colour of every object with which they came in contact, and boots of undressed hide, afforded what might well be termed an unvarnished exterior. Nor did a skin tanned to a rich mahogany and a magnificent brown beard detract from his wild appearance. His whiskers also were of remarkable length, and curled in stiff corkscrew ringlets down to his shoulders. Gilbert fancied he had seen that face before, yet where in civilised life was it possible that he could have met this strange apparition of the bush?

Nothing abashed by the scrutiny he had invited, the stranger proceeded—

"I'm on my way to Sidney, I am. That's where I'm bound. Where do I hail from?—that's tellings. Well, you're good chaps, both of you, I can see, and born gentlemen, I'll lay a guinea, though you are two-handed, but a man soon learns to be two-handed in the bush. Ay, I know the sort, though I haven't see a true-bred one for a month or two of Sundays. It's not so long that I've quite forgotten it, since I'd boot-trees of my own, and was a go-to-nothing

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hat and kid gloves on weekdays. I shouldn't lose my way to-morrow if you set me down on the heath at the Turn-of-the-lands in a fog. You look surprised ; but bless ye, things happen every day to take the skin off a man's eyes. Now, where d'ye think this 'baccy-bag came from?"

He looked humorously from one to the other as each professed his inability to answer the question.

"You've heard of the diggings, where the gold grows. Well, it's been 'rock the cradle, Lucy,' with me before this; and though there *may* be queerer places than the diggings on earth, it's not been my luck to meet with them as yet. I'd a mate there, a thin chap with a cough. Poor beggar! how that cough of his kept me awake o' nights; and somehow, though he was no great things to work, I liked the chap too. He took an extraordinary fancy to me, and you'll say that's strange, but the reason's stranger still. 'Twas all along of my wearing a bit of a gimcrack thing that I didn't seem to care about parting with, and his mother had one like it, so he said, at home. People have queer fancies, d'ye see, up there. Well, we went share and share alike, and whether we made an ounce or a hundredweight that's neither here nor there. But the work he did, light as it was, seemed too much for him; and one day he says to me, 'Bill,' says he (you may call me 'Bill,' gentlemen, and I shall esteem it a compliment)—'I'm about washed out,' says he; 'what'll you do for me when I'm gone?'—'Gone, be hanged!' says I; 'where are you going to?' He was a fanciful lad, and he pointed up into the sky—blazing hot it looked, I thought—and says he, 'Up there, I hope, Bill! When my time comes you put me quietly in the ground, and say a prayer over me, there's a good fellow! I wouldn't like to be buried like a dog!' So of course I promised him, and that day I thought he was stronger and worked better than common. I liked the lad, I tell ye, so I did; but it's no use talking about that now.

"Well, gentlemen, there are robberies, as far as I can make out, all over the world. I've seen men robbed in Paris and London, and at Epsom and Newmarket, as well as at Ballarat. It don't make much odds whether a fellow empties your pockets with his legs under the same table or his hand on your throat; not but what we'd the cream of society too for the skimming. Next lot to me was a baronet—not a very spicy one, but a baronet all the same—and his mate was an Honourable, and a precious bad one he was! There was a lawyer working fourteen hours a day beyond them, and a Methodist parson, who got *delirium tremens*, and so went

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under. Men of all sorts meet at the diggings; and though the article's scarce enough in most places, I didn't think you could have gone through so many trades and professions without running against an honest man. My mate was the best of them, poor fellow; and even he took a cullender once that didn't belong to him; to be sure he returned it when he'd done with it, for he had a conscience, you know, and was a scholar, and a poet too, and such-like. I've seen the tears in a strong chap's eyes to hear him quavering away with his weak voice how

'They fitted a grey marble slab to a tomb,
And fair Alice lies under the stone.'

It's a neat thing, enough, gentlemen; I'll sing it to you to-morrow.

"We'd a little gold-dust in a bag—it makes no odds how much, but it took us a goodish time to get; and digging isn't such roaring fun that you'd go out of your way to take a longer spell than you can help. So we put it away in a hole, and I slept above it with a revolver pretty handy. My mate knew I could make very fair practice at that game, if necessary.

"Well, the same night after he'd been talking to me so chicken-hearted, I woke with a start to hear a scuffling noise in the tent, and my own name in a smothered voice, like a man's half-strangled. I jumped on my legs pretty smart, I can tell you; and, dark as it was, I soon caught hold. There were two or three of them inside who'd come without an invitation, and one made a bolt of it in less than no time. He was no bad judge neither, for I was more than half riled, and less than that makes me feel ugly at close grips. As he dashed out he tore the tent open, and the moonlight streaming in, I saw the muzzle of a pistol point-blank for *this* child's head, and a glittering eye squinting over it that looked like making sure. Just then my mate broke from the beggar who held him, and sprang up between us to take the ball in his brisket that was meant for me. The tent was full of smoke, and the poor chap fell stone dead at my feet."

The narrator's voice failed him a little at this stage of his recital, and he complained that the smoke from the fire got in his eyes.

"What next?" he resumed, in answer to a question from Gilbert, who betrayed a flattering interest in the story; "I passed my hand behind the villain's arms, and pinioned him as neat as wax. He cried for mercy then, the white-livered slave, when he heard the click of my revolver turning round to the cock! I looked in his eyes and saw by the glare of

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them that he judged me wolfish, and I guess he wasn't far out. The kitchen was clear by that time; there was only us two, and my mate's dead body in the tent. There was but *one* left to walk out and cool himself five minutes afterwards, for I shot the beggar through the heart at short notice; and all the plunder he had on him, as I'm a living man and a thirsty one, was this little sealskin pouch, filled with the best tobacco I ever smoked yet. I judged he'd robbed a poor Spaniard who was found with his throat cut some days before. Howsoever, it's lucky it was in his right breast-pocket, or my ball would have spoiled the bag. There's a screw or so left, gentlemen; fill your pipes again."

"And your mate?" said the two listeners in a breath.

"I buried him next morning when the sun rose," answered the stranger, "and I said a prayer over him too, as I promised. It couldn't do him any harm; and I sometimes think I was none the worse for it myself for a day or two. I worked on my own hook after that, and I rather think I paid my expenses; but you've maybe discovered, gentlemen, that gold isn't just as sticky as treacle, and all the money-bags I've seen yet have a small hole at the mouth and a large one at the far end. I kept an hotel at Melbourne once; that's the best business I ever had—breakfasts thirteen shillings a head, and champagne a guinea a pint. I could drive my four horses and play cards every evening, fifty pounds a cut. But somehow they burnt the place to the ground one night with their games, and I walked out in a pair of trousers and an old silk handkerchief, glad enough to have saved my skin. Then I opened a spirit-store, and was undersold by one of my own waiters. That was a bad job, for I had to leave in debt; but my best customer he wanted a man to look after a sheep-run, and he took me for lack of a better. I could have put by some money too, but the life's enough to kill a fellow who hasn't been regularly broke for a hermit, and I cut it before I'd been with him six weeks. I've done a few odd jobs since then, and travelled over most of the colony, either for business or pleasure. For my part, I think one place is very like another. In the meantime I wish you good-night, gentlemen. You've given me plenty to eat and drink, many thanks to you, and for smoking and sleeping I can shift for myself."

In two minutes more he was fast asleep; and his entertainers, nothing loth to follow so good an example, threw a fresh log on the fire, and betook themselves without further ceremony to their repose.

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Gilbert remained awake after the other two had begun to snore. Happiness is no heavy sleeper; and it was a luxury which of late he never missed, to lie for a while with half-shut eyes, and suffer his fancy to wander into that golden future, which every day that passed seemed to bring more near. He was so happy; he felt so kindly disposed towards his fellow-creatures. This adventurer, sleeping heavily by his side, seemed, notwithstanding his eccentricities, to be an honest, well-meaning fellow enough. He would find out more about him to-morrow; he would befriend him, and perhaps help him to a chance of something better than the wild reckless life he had lately led. It was so delightful to do good for Ada's sake—to refer all his feelings and actions to the imaginary standard by which he thought she would judge them.

There is a story in one of the old romaunts of an unknown champion who never raised his vizor lest man or woman should look upon his face; but who rode the country like a true Paladin, rescuing the oppressed from the oppressor, winning armour, and gems, and countless riches with his sword, and bestowing greatest *largesses* on all who were in need, the bad and good alike. Yet never a guerdon asked he for blood or treasure save one. On the vanquished knight at his feet, the rescued damsel at his bridle hand, the beggar by the wayside, the barefooted hermit, and the mitred abbot, he imposed the same conditions—*Priez pour elle*. With those three words he claimed his wages; and day by day the prayers from warm, thankful hearts went up to heaven for Her. Thus she prospered, and was happy, and forgot him. So at last he won a king's battle, fighting, as was his wont, in the van. But a lance-head broke deep in that honest breast, and a shrewd sword-stroke clove the trusty headpiece in twain, and for the first time in harness or in hall, men looked on the pale, worn face of the unknown knight! So they turned his rein out of the press, and brought him to the king. Then did that monarch swear on his sword-hilt that he would reward him by whatsoever he should ask, were it the hand of his only daughter or the jewels out of his very crown; but the knight's white lips smiled feebly, for the blood was welling up through his armour, and draining his life faster and faster away. His voice was very low and thick, yet did men hear him plainly; *Priez pour elle*, said he, and so fell dead. Then a bonnie bird flew to the bower of a lightsome ladye, and beat with its wings against the casement, till she put forth her snowy arm and it perched upon her wrist. Said the lightsome ladye—

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“Bonnie bird, bonnie bird, comest thou from my love?” And the bonnie bird answered—“From which of thy false loves? from him in scarlet and in ermine? or from him in rochet and stole? from the Prince of the Isles with his golden crest? or the pretty page with his lute on his knee?” But she said—“From none of these. Comest thou from my own true love in the plain steel harness, with his lance in the rest, and his vizor ever down?” Then said the bonnie bird—“Thy true love sleeps in his plain steel harness, and his vizor is up at last, and men have looked upon his face.” But the lightsome ladye’s cheek turned white as her snowy arm, for she knew then that he was dead, and she said—*Qui me gagne, me perd; qui m’a perdu m’a gagne.*

So the false loves mourned a while for the sake of the lightsome ladye, because she smiled on them no longer; and after a year and a day, the shadow of the bonnie bird flitted across a new-made grave, and when it perched at the casement, behold, the lightsome ladye was in her bower no more. Then it was well for her that the prayers of the good and bad, and the poor and sorrowing, and the hungry and thirsty, had interceded for her soul.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A PRIOR CLAIM

“**M**ORE sore backs,” observed John Gordon in a tone of condensed provocation, as, being the earliest riser of the three, he returned to the fire, and put the pot on for breakfast, after a matutinal visit to the horses. Already he had caught and tethered them; and on examination of those ridden by his friend and the stranger, had discovered that their hides were severely galled under the saddle, and that neither of them would probably carry a man’s weight without considerable suffering for many days. This is a casualty none the less irritating that it is the common lot of all equestrians. This it is that destroys the efficiency of a cavalry soldier; and reduces the traveller to the ignominious necessity of walking with his bridle over his arm. Alas, that there is no remedy for it but rest!

Gilbert and the stranger still slept soundly and peacefully side by side, dreaming, it might be, each of them, of the fresh English glades and the cool English breeze; of rich waving meadow or smiling upland farm; perhaps of a fair English face, that itself made the fatherland emphatically *a home*. John soon roused them; Bill—as he requested his entertainers to call him—proving himself no mean adept in the art of roughing it, and improvising with ingenious skill a multitude of little comforts astonishing to his less experienced comrades. As he became more familiar with them, too, he seemed gradually to recover the manners of a man who had lived in good society. His tone lost much of its coarseness, his expressions many of those quaint Yankeeisms which have become the colloquial slang of adventurers in every part of the world. Without quite coming up to the standard of a gentleman in the somewhat fastidious opinions of Orme and Gordon, he had evidently the trick and turn of speech habitual to certain circles, and which, once attained, is never lost again. Altogether Bill puzzled both of his entertainers considerably.

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After breakfast—consisting of a *réchauffé* of the steamer, and the tin mug filled with weak tea—a council of war was established, and future measures taken into consideration. Two of the party must walk—there could be no question on that point; and as John's horse was the only available animal, it was settled that he should ride up the creek to a certain bay from which he knew his way to the spot where their people had camped, while Gilbert and the stranger should remain where they were, till fresh horses could be sent for them, when they would all proceed together towards Sydney, that being the ultimate destination of the whole party.

So the two new acquaintances watched John's retreating form as he rode away through the bush, and prepared to spend the long summer's day in the society of each other, and the care of their enfeebled horses. Being Englishmen, the latter topic afforded them an inexhaustible fund of conversation, and the points of Bill's mount, an animal possessing extraordinary powers of speed and endurance, were canvassed at considerable length.

"He is a right good one," said his master, eyeing with no small disgust the running wound in the poor beast's back. "And yesterday was the fifth day he must have carried me from seventy to eighty miles. I've been far up the country to look at a sheep-farm, and now I'm on my way back to Sydney about paying for it. It's a queer life, this, for a man who once had a decent house over his head, and drove his own cab every day into London; ay, and could give a friend as good a dinner as a duke. It's been a queer time, mine, from first to last—mostly in a gale of wind; always a heavy sea; not the steadiest fellow alive at the helm; and a strong tendency to carry too much sail in all weathers. I should have been a different man but for three things. I never could resist making money, I never could resist staking money, and I never could resist spending money. I sometimes wonder whether I shall drop my anchor in smooth water at last. I sometimes think I should like to have done with these ups and downs; to make one more good hit that would make me straight again; and so go home to my wife, lead a new life, and toddle peaceably on towards my grave."

"What! are you married then?" asked Gilbert, with increasing interest in his companion.

"That am I," was the reply; "and to as nice a woman, and as pretty a woman, and as good a woman, as you'll see in a summer's day. It's been a strange story, mine, from first to

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last. We've nothing to do but smoke and yarn the whole of this blessed day; if you'll light your pipe and sit down, I'll tell it you."

Gilbert acceded willingly; throwing himself at length on the dry ground in the shade, he lit up the indispensable pipe, and listened attentively.

"I began too fast," said the narrator; "I've gone on too fast; I expect I shall finish too fast. If it's at all downhill the pace will be something quite out of the common. I've had friends, plenty of them; fine jovial fellows, who would back me for all they were worth, so long as I was in luck; and I never found one of them yet that I could depend upon when the wheel turned. There was a time in my life, to be sure I was very young, when I thought a sworn brother would have seen me through anything. I have learned better since then; but I don't think I owe those any thanks who taught me the lesson. Well, as I was telling you, they turned me loose in Paris at sixteen, with plenty of money in my pockets, and not so very green for my age. Before I was twenty, I found out one or two things that are better not learned quite so soon. I found out that there's only one person a man of sense ever considers, and that the more you make men and women subservient to your own interests, the better they treat you, especially the women. I found out you should never go in for a stake without resolving to stand for no repairs, but to win, whatever it costs; and above all, I found out that if once a woman gets your head under water, she ducks you till you are drowned. I'm not such a fool as I look; and one lesson was all I needed to teach me that. Ah! Mademoiselle Aimée! I don't think it was I who had the worst of it when all was done."

There was something repulsive in his jarring laugh, as he gave vent to this vindictive reflection; something grating to his listener's feelings, for Gilbert was one of those men whom a woman might have ruined, body and soul, and he would never have visited it on *her*.

"Well, sir, when I came to England I led a pleasant life enough. I had plenty of floating capital, and I knew how to make the most of it. I wasn't one of your fine gentlemen who can ruffle it bravely so long as the wind's fair and the tide helps them on. I could make the most of a good thing, and the best of a bad one; so before I had spent the whole of my first fortune I had taken out three times its value in amusement and dissipation. I liked the life. Hang it, sir! I should like the life over again. It wasn't bad fun to

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go to Epsom and Ascot, Newmarket and Goodwood, with champagne and sunshine, pretty bonnets and kind looks, and a good guess at the colours that would be first past the judge's chair. There's nothing like it in this cursed country. But it was worth while to stand in a barouche up to your neck in muslin with the fast ones who had won their glove-bets, thanking you for 'putting them on,' and the quiet ones, who wanted to have a look at the winner, leaning over your shoulder to see his jockey go to scale; and a 'monkey' at least to the credit side of your own book landed in about a minute and a half. But what's the use of talking about it? You've seen it all yourself. Bless you, I know your face as well as my own; and, forgive me for saying, if it wasn't for your beard I could put a name to it, I'm sure. Well, sir, this sort of thing has but one fault that I know of—it's too good to last. The better the liquor, you know, the sooner you get to the end of the bottle. I made a bad hit or two in the money-market, and I lost a cracker backing Armstrong's lot for the Derby. If you were there, you'll agree with me that Belphegor was pulled. There never was so gross a case. The Rejected goes and wins the Two Thousand. I myself saw him tried with his stable-companion, and the latter beat him by three lengths in a mile and a half. The worst of the two was five pounds better than anything else in the race. What is the result? When they come out at Epsom, Belphegor runs third for the Derby; the other horse is nowhere; and Armstrong wins the largest stake in the ring. I tell you it was a robbery—the biggest of the year. They put me in the hole, the scoundrels! and I've never had a chance at them since. I was forced to go abroad for a while; but I got into some money from a cousin soon after, and paid up everything. I had enough to live on; and if I could have kept out of the market I might have done well. I married a wife, too, and took a pretty little house near London, where we lived quietly and comfortably enough. I have often thought since that this was the happiest time of my life. She was a good, contented soul, ay, and a pretty one too. It's so long since I've seen a real fresh English-woman, it does me good to think of her, with her soft brown hair and gentle quiet ways. There's nothing like 'em, to my fancy; and I daresay you agree with me?"

Gilbert subscribed willingly to his companion's sentiments. He had formed his own ideal of woman's beauty, and was not likely to depart from a standard that was seldom absent from his thoughts, that he had looked on again only last night in

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his dreams. We have each of us our different pattern. I have seen Titian's Venus, every bit of her, and Canova's, and nearly all the Madonnas. I can fancy the Anadyomene rising in the lustre of her charms, fresh and radiant, from the sparkling wave; can picture to myself the deep eyes, the queenly brow, the loving lips, the glowing limbs, and rich ambrosial tresses, wreathed in shells and gold. And yet—and yet! to me a worn, stained glove, a withered leaf, crushed and sapless as my own old heart, can recall more of beauty, more of worship, more of longing, loving sorrow, than Titian's colours, or Canova's marble, than all the Madonnas with all their holy perfections, nay, than the shining vision itself of Love's majestic goddess, offspring of the sea and sky.

Gilbert's standard was a fair one enough. He liked to think of her whilst he led his companion to talk on of those peaceful days.

"There's a deal of confinement about a married life," proceeded the latter; "and at last, what with speculations failing, and Consols dropping all at once, not to mention a continual run of ill-luck with the bones, I saw no way out of it but to bolt. So I broke it to the missis one fine morning, and sailed that same night. Short notice, you'll say, sir; and so it was. But women are like horses in many ways, and in none more than this: that we never know what they can do till we try them. She was a regular trump, that wife of mine. I left her what I could in the way of furniture and odds and ends, but she made me take every rap of money she could muster, poor thing! And she put up all her little trinkets in a packet, and thrust it into my hand when I started. There's only one of them left, but I'll never part with it as long as I live. Look ye. Here it is!"

He drew a small gold bracelet from his breast as he spoke, and handed it to Gilbert, who examined it with the reverence due to a husband's last memorial from his wife. It wanted cleaning sadly, and was worn and frayed here and there, where it had nestled against bowie-knife or revolver, or some such uncongenial companion. Many a strange scene had that little keepsake witnessed, many an unholy orgy and wild midnight carouse. Yet, bad as he was, the man had the grace to lay it aside upon occasion, rather than pollute the only link he had with a purer, fairer state of being passed away for evermore. There were times, too, in his adventurous life, when he was penniless, that the sale of such an article would have brought twenty times its cost among his reckless, half-savage associates. But no! some inward feeling he

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could not define bade him rather starve than part with his wife's farewell gift. He said as much while he laid it away once more within his breast; and Gilbert, keenly alive to all such impressions, vowed in his heart that there was good in the man, after all, and that he would do everything in his power to benefit him ere they should part.

"I'd a curious run of ill-luck," he proceeded, "after I came to the colony. First I failed in one line, then in another; at last I got so involved I was forced to cut and run. Come! you're a good chap and a gentleman; I don't mind telling you. I made them put my death in the papers. I changed my name. I started fresh in a new line; and got on like a house on fire. It's a long time ago now. I've never heard from England since. Sometimes I've thought I'd write; but what's the use? She thinks she has been a widow for years; perhaps she has married again. I hope she's got one that is kind to her. I don't often bother about it. I can't think what has come over me just now; but somehow to-day I would give my allowance of grog to know what has become of Ada. Hold on, sir! There, you've broke your pipe."

In effect, Gilbert started and turned pale at the name, breaking in his confusion the cherished pipe that had been so artistically coloured by many weeks of judicious smoking. It took him a minute or two to reflect that there might be more Adas than one in the world; and that it was neither rational nor manly to allow the enunciation of three letters to produce such an effect on his demeanour. These proper names are sufficiently cabalistic in their effects. I have seen a life-guardsmen, six-feet-two, with moustaches down to his elbows, utterly put to confusion by a discerning little lady five years of age. The champion good-humouredly asked her name.

"Dora," answered that matter-of-fact personage, in one of those clear childish trebles which command immediate attention from a whole dinner-table, "you know it is, because I heard you say it twice when you were looking at Aunt Dottie's picture in the library."

Ambrosial whiskers somewhat shaded and toned down the blushes of that helpless dragoon; but poor Aunt Dottie, who wore her hair *à l'impératrice*, remained considerably pinker than usual for the rest of the evening. Well, well, Frank Grant has painted a better picture of her now than the one in the library; and she has got a rival already in the affections of her incautious captain, a sturdy little rival, whose

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name is also Dora, and who screams and tussles lustily to go to papa.

The adventurer picked up the broken fragments of the pipe, and returned them to their owner. It must have been something in the pallor of Gilbert's face that recalled his features as they had appeared on race-courses and at cricket-matches long ago, before he had become bronzed by an Australian sun; for his companion gave his thigh a slap, as a man does when a bright thought has flashed across him, and exclaimed exultingly—

"I remember you now. I can tell you where I saw you last; they pointed you out to me as a heavy loser when Potiphar broke down at Goodwood. Your name is Orme."

Gilbert owned the fact, and his friend seized him cordially by the hand.

"It's strange we should make acquaintance for the first time out here. You're a gentleman, I know; I can trust you; my real name is Latimer!"

Latimer! Then it *was* Ada—his Ada—the Ada who had visited him in his morning dreams not six hours ago, when he lay by this man's side! Reader, have you ever had a knock-down blow that has crushed, and stunned, and stupefied you all at once? You cannot describe the feeling, you cannot analyse it. You can scarcely call that dumb, helpless suffering by the name of pain. Pain is something to bear, something to fight with and rebel against; something, at worst, under which you can writhe, and gnash your teeth, and call upon your God; something to which you feel in justice there must be a limit. Pain comes to-morrow, when you wake to the sense of your bereavement or your grief, and lift up your voice and pray in mercy that you may die! it is not pain that you endure all to-night in that dull, dead stupor, turning doggedly to the wall with a misty notion that it is but a dream, and waking, all will be well. There is a limit to bodily suffering, and your doctor calls it syncope—there is a limit to mental agony, and your friends call it madness; but oh, what tortures will the brain not bear before it reels into frenzy! what a weight of sorrow must be laid upon the poor heart before it breaks altogether and acknowledges that henceforth there is no hope! Who that has suffered here on earth (and which of us is there can say, "I have not drunk from the bitter cup, nor eaten of the bread of affliction"?) that shall dare to speculate on the torments of a lost soul? Can any human imagery come near that thrilling metaphor of "the worm that dieth not, and the fire that is not quenched"?

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And yet, how far may not even this fall short of the awful reality? I shudder to contemplate sufferings to which our past experiences shall but bear the same proportion as does Time to Eternity. Sufferings such as we cannot imagine, although we have quivered in anguish here, although we have been bruised, and mangled, and crushed into the dust; sufferings from which the friend who never failed us yet will turn away indifferent, and of which the sting shall be increased tenfold, by the maddening consciousness of what is — and what might have been.

Gilbert felt like a man under a sunstroke. It was strange that Latimer did not notice his utter prostration of mind and body, his vague replies, his wandering glances, scanning earth and heaven as it were for help, or explanation, or relief. But Ada's husband was busy with his own reflections. He had unbosomed himself to-day for the first time for years; and the very act of telling his own story had led him insensibly back into the past. He was lost in a labyrinth of recollections, and for a time remained as silent and abstracted as the stupefied man by his side.

So they sat on, watching the shadows lengthening by degrees, and one grew drowsy at last and slept, and one remained in a fixed rigid posture, with the sweat pouring from his white face, and his eyes staring vacantly on the landscape, where the sun shone down so pitiless, and the mocking breeze swept by with a cruel laugh. There was that in his heart which turned God's fairest works to a horror and a curse.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE TEMPTATION

HE has great suggestive powers, that arch-enemy, who for so many centuries has studied the habits of his prey. Doth not the angler's cunning skilfully adapt his devices to the appetites of his hungry victims? For the fastidious trout a delicate palmer; the lob-worm for greedy gudgeons; and to enthrall the stately salmon, who but gaudy "Meg-in-her-braws"? So, brother, my bait may be a snug sinecure; yours a white shoulder or a twinkling ankle. Orpheus goes down the broad road willingly, because Eurydice beckons him from the far end. John Smith has no objection in life to the same journey for half a crown a day and his beer. Each is promised his price, and save wise Lord Soulis, who reserved a right to his own soul, if his body should be neither in a church nor out of a church, and who did in effect cause himself to be buried beneath the church wall, I have never heard of one who could cozen the great cozener of the human race. Many shapes and aspects, too, are his—from the serpent crawling on its belly, to the bright splendour of the morning star; perhaps the most dangerous of all the forms he can assume is that in which he fell. We may do battle with the fiend, but who shall say to the radiant angel, "Avoid thee, and tempt me no more"? Many instruments has he also in his workshop, keen and polished, and ready for immediate use. He will place them in your hand at a moment's notice. Ere you have time to think, you may have cut away the cord for ever that moors you to your haven. Last night, full of bread and hot with wine, you longed for the breath of beauty to cool your brow, and lo! she was there, smiling, and fragrant, and lively; so you held out your wrists for the shackles, and bound yourself hand and foot, and did homage to her you had abjured, and became a vassal and a slave once more. Next Sunday, going humbly to your prayers, a thousand little annoyances and irritations will spring up like weeds and nettles in your

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path, to draw your eyes and thoughts to earth from heaven. Your servants will mutiny at sunrise, your womankind will vex you at breakfast, the friend of your boyhood will ill-use you about a deed. Irritated and impatient, you will curse the crossing-sweeper who splashes you, even at the church door. In great matters and in little, one furnishes the opportunity and the means. It is the same hand that rumples the roseleaf to spoil a potentate's temper for the day, and that proffers the ready noose in which a maddened mother strangles the child of shame. Only you be willing to do his work, and he will take care that you shall never want for tools.

Latimer slept heavily once more. The fatigue of many successive days of severe labour had told even on his hardened frame. Notwithstanding his previous night's rest, he lay like a man who was thoroughly in want of repose, every limb relaxed and helpless, whilst his deep, regular breathing attested a slumber disturbed neither by dreams nor anxieties. His companion sat motionless by his side, it might have been for hours—he never knew; suddenly he started and looked down at the sleeper. It seemed strange to Gilbert that any man could lie so still unless he were dead. *Unless he were dead!* He kept repeating the words unmeaningly to himself; now with slow monotonous distinctness, now in a sort of wild chant to which they set themselves unbidden. Unless he were dead. And what was this death of which men make such a bugbear; which many affronted knowingly and willingly, which all men must often unconsciously approach? This man—this Latimer. O God! that he should bear that name; how it tore him to think of it! this Latimer, then, must have been near it very often. In the course of his wild adventurous career must have learned to look upon it without terror, scarcely with aversion; must have prepared many a time for the shock; nay, it was but one of the chances and casualties to which all were liable, none more than those who were travelling alone through this trackless Australian wilderness. He himself ran the same risk; truly in such a country a man may be said to carry his life in his hand. Was it really so valuable a possession? Could one more or less, indeed, make so much difference in the great scheme?

Unless he were dead! If he were dead he would hardly look different, lying there so still. How easy it would be for a bushranger, or such lawless brigand, to rob him as he slept! How easy if he woke to quiet him for ever; how simple to dig a hole down yonder in the mud by that winding creek, and hide all evidence of the crime. A bushranger would



H. Brock

"He looked down at the sleeper."

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do it for the value of his powder-horn. So different with different men is the standard of crime; and the bushranger would camp at night with but little additional remorse that he had one more murder on his conscience. Suppose such a thing were to happen. Suppose some merciless ruffian were to come upon him now in his sleep, and there were none to help, and the body were taken away and hidden! Then would to-day be as if it had never been. Then would he, Gilbert Orme, be once more as he was when he awoke this morning. A time that seemed to be centuries ago. There would be still a fair world for him, and a laughing sky, and a hopeful future, and heaven at the end. Who was this man that he should thus have come between him and his happiness?—a happiness the man himself had voluntarily resigned and abandoned. What right had he to the rose he had thrown wilfully away, the gem of which he never knew—never could have known—the value? Then he thought of the brightness of the gem, the sweetness of the flower; thought of her as he saw her the first time they ever met; the last time when she blessed him while they parted; and his brain reeled, and “his punishment was greater than he could bear.”

Unless he were dead! Gilbert Orme felt the edge and point of his gleaming knife—how cold and bright it was! He thought of the quick turn of John's wrist as his blade crossed the poor kangaroo's throat, and the smoking blood leaping so freely from the wound. It was a horrible fascination to think how easily such things could be done. It was a relief from the crushing effects of the blow he had sustained to reflect on any other subject in the world, most of all on this. If he had not been an educated man and a gentleman; nay, if he had even been inured to scenes of blood and violence, it would not seem so impracticable to get rid of that sleeping man. Not while he slept,—oh no! that would be cowardice added to crime; but a brave unscrupulous spirit might surely wake his enemy, and so giving him an equal chance, grapple with him to the death. What was it then, but a life taken in fair fight, after all? It would be easy to call him a bushranger, and talk about an attempt at violence and a resolute defence. If it went the other way, and he were himself a victim? Ah! better so, better any death, than to live without Ada. The very name softened him. Again his fancy wandered and his brain reeled; his hand closed tight on the hunting-knife, but his eyes were fixed on a fair picture painted in glowing colours, such as human artist never yet could grind.

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He saw the pretty breakfast-room in the old house at West Acres, with his father's portrait on the wall, and windows opening to the park, where the old trees were bursting into a tender green, and the deer leaping amongst the fern in the fair spring sunshine. He saw a gentle lady sweeping in with her own quiet grace and calm matronly smile, to take her rightful place opposite his chair, where the light rippled off her shining tresses, and the deep, soft eyes grew deeper and softer in the shade. He saw little children with the dear mother's face playing round her, clinging to the soft hand, or holding by the muslin folds of that simple morning dress. He saw the neatness, the order, and the sacred beauty of a home; far off he saw the gradual descent into the vale of years, and the gates of heaven shining yonder on the mountain, and the long pathway they would travel hand in hand. Then he looked down and saw Latimer sleeping, more stilly, more heavily than ever man slept yet—*unless he were dead.*

He put the knife back into its sheath. A new thought struck him: he was mad—he knew he was mad; and yet he could reason now calmly, logically, and by consequence. The revolver was the more efficient weapon; one touch to its trigger and the thing was done. He possessed himself of Latimer's pistol, and examined it carefully. All five chambers were loaded: one of them would be sufficient for the purpose; he would be no murderer, not he!—but this man and himself should have an equal chance for life. Thus he argued: they could not both live and be happy; one must give way; fate should determine the victim. He would draw lots, his own life against this man's—a murder or suicide—and abide by the issue! Ha, ha! Was that mocking laugh from heaven or hell? Did it come from the bush behind him, or the sleeper at his feet? Surely not from his own lips! Again it was repeated harshly, distinctly. Laugh on, good devil, laugh on! We are busy about your work; we will come to you for our wages by and by.

That laugh of Gilbert's must have disturbed him, for the sleeper stirred and turned, and muttered indistinctly. Even then his enemy hoped it was a prayer, and, though his finger was on the trigger, he stooped down to listen. Latimer must have been dreaming, for he said, "Ada, Ada!" twice over, and breathing heavily, was immediately asleep again.

The words acted on Gilbert like a spell. His whole frame shook and shivered; he laid the pistol on the ground quite gently, and sat down confused and breathless. He felt faint

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and sick at heart. The man belonged to Ada after all, and he would have killed him—killed Ada's husband!—one whom she at least had cherished and valued, who had loved her, who perhaps loved her even now. Killed him! oh no! He must have been mad; he, who would prize a dog for Ada's sake. He felt kindly now towards the very man against whom he had well-nigh lifted a murderer's red hand but one short minute back. For Ada's sake! Never till that moment had he known how much he loved her. Does the brightness of heaven, think ye, glow with half such splendour to the exulting seraphim as to the poor lost spirit, turning sadly from the light to its own portion of darkness for evermore?

Then the reaction came on, and he fled into the bush and threw himself on his face in the long grass, and wept tears of blood. God help him! had he fallen on his knees and thanked his Maker for his deliverance from the guilt of murder, crying aloud for mercy, that the rod might be spared, the burden lightened, if ever such a little—I think even then it had been the saving of my boy.

John Gordon came back with the fresh horses as he had promised, and day after day the three men journeyed on together in brotherly kindness and good-fellowship through the bush; but when Gilbert arrived at Sydney there were white hairs in the soft brown beard, and a wistful look in the worn, anxious face that had never been there before, that never left it afterwards.

CHAPTER XXX

THE AUSTRALIAN MAIL



HAPPINESS is a wondrous beautifier. No cordial or cosmetic has ever yet been invented to impart such a lustre to the eyes, such a brilliancy to the skin. Under its influence even the withered branch seems to blossom into leaf; how much more, then, does it enhance the bloom of a flower glowing in its summer prime. As Ada walked along the streets, people turned round to look at her. There was a buoyancy in her gait, a brightness in her glance, a colour in her cheek, that betrayed a heart overflowing with its own deep sense of joy. And well might she be happy. Was she not a woman, and had she not won the treasure which is a woman's most coveted possession? They can do very well without it. I have not lived to the age at which "grizzling hair the brain doth clear," to subscribe to the aphorisms of poets and romancers, who affirm that love is the essence of female existence. Not a bit of it. I know hundreds, and so do you, who tread the daily path contentedly enough, unscathed by the arrows of the mischievous boy, and scarcely even brushed by his wings, just as I have seen many a sweet flower reared in a dark close chamber, watered from a broken jug, and screened by envious chimney-pots from the genial rays of the morning sun. But of course if you transplant the flower into a garden, if you place her where she can bask in the smiles of the day-god, and open her petals to the showers of heaven, she will out-bloom her former self in her new prosperity, even as bleak, barren March is out-bloomed by the merry month of June.

Ada was no longer young. I mean that her heart and intellect were matured, although she was still in the noontide

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of her womanhood. As a girl her affections had remained untouched. In her married life she had indeed suffered sundry vague longings and imaginings to cross her fancy as to certain items which might constitute mortal happiness, but had concluded, and justly, that it was but the portion of a favoured few, and that she for one must be content to dispense with the golden lot. That she tried hard to love Latimer I honestly believe. Alas, that in such endeavours the success is seldom in proportion to the effect! Alas, that the hot-house flower should be so difficult to force, while the corresponding weed we would fain eradicate spreads and germinates and thrives the more for all our labour to cut it down, and tear it out and trample it to the ground!

When Ada's husband left her, she felt alone in the world, and the sensation was rather a relief. When she heard of his death at Sydney, the few natural tears she dropped were soon dried, and it seemed to her no novel nor altogether unwelcome situation to be isolated and self-dependent. She had no near relatives left; she had no child about which her heart could cling. She accepted her lot with a sort of bitter resignation, and flattered herself that she was a hard, sensible, unimaginative sort of person, for whom the matter-of-fact and the practical were all in all. She, with her father's warm, generous heart, and her mother's dreamy German temperament, and her own soft, kindly disposition! How little we know ourselves. Why, at one time of her life, when she began giving lessons to Lady Gertrude, she was actually distrustful of her own beauty, thought she was losing her colour and growing old, pondered on the effect a few years would have, and wished her outward appearance as different as possible, like a fool as she was.

Certain philosophers opine that the softer sex are very much alike. One of the bitterest affirms

“Most women have no characters at all.”

I would do battle on each of these points to the death. In the first place, every woman is from herself most dissimilar, and this fact alone multiplies the variety of the species *ad infinitum*. It is surely a logical sequence that where one specimen is multiform, the class cannot be homogeneous. With regard to their want of character, is it not allowed on all sides that the principal distinctive quality of the female mind is a positive adherence to its own opinions, that its intuitive perceptions are of the keenest and most incontrovertible? Also that its resolution and tenacity of purpose remain

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entirely unshaken by extraneous influences, such as argument, expediency, plain reason, or even the all-important consideration of self-interest? What is this but force of character of the strongest and most undeniable? I think I have made out my case.

Other women might not have felt as Ada felt; other women might not have acted as she did. She was one by herself, and I never knew such another; nor was I the only man that thought so.

Well, after she had made up her mind to live in darkness all her life, the light began to dawn upon her. Can you blame her that she turned to it, and opened her eyes wide, stretching her arms towards the east, and preparing to bask in the sunbeams? Can you blame her that, hour by hour, as the rays increased in warmth and brilliance, she bathed and steeped her whole being as it were in the golden floods? Science tells us there is no such thing as colour in the dark, that a red coat is *not* a red coat, nor a peach-coloured silk any more peach-coloured than it is a peach; that the action of light on the particles which constitute their surface produces the effect we choose to term colour, and that where the light is not the colour is not. I accept unhesitatingly whatever science thinks well to offer, and am quite willing to believe, the more that I cannot understand; but I think I know of another light also "that never was on sea or land," which imparts its own hues to every object on which it plays, and when it is withdrawn leaves the red coat but a sad-coloured garment, the peach-silk a dull and dreary weed.

In the meantime, though the early spring days were dark and cold, though Belgrave Square was a sufficiently cheerless locality at that time of year, though the other street-passengers looked chill and cross, with muffled chins and angry red noses, Ada walked on in the halo of an artificial lustre, and influenced by its glamour, saw all material objects under an aspect of her own. The leafless trees glowed like the gardens of Paradise; the dingy houses outshone that magic city, flaming with gems and paved with virgin ore, which to this day the Mexican beholds in his dreams, and the enterprising traveller seeks in vain. The muddy macadamised street gleamed like the golden waters of Cathay. How happy she was—how supremely happy! Life seemed to have nothing more to offer than what she had already, or what a few weeks would surely bring. What a joyous world it was—what bliss only to live and love—what a bountiful Creator who thus lavished blessings on his children! Whatever the future

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might have in store, it was something to experience such happiness as she did to-day! Her full heart thanked Heaven in a silent prayer. As it did so a misgiving came across her, not for the first time, that she had been wanting in her duty to her love.

Ada was a pure-hearted and a trusting woman—one, moreover, who had known sorrow and adversity. Need I say that a strong religious sense—an implicit confidence in the protection of the Almighty—was to her as the very air she breathed? Once or twice she had touched upon the most sacred of topics in conversation with Gilbert. Each time from a feeling of diffidence, and unwillingness to approach the one important subject of time and eternity, she had left unsaid much that she now regretted. Since she parted from him she had often reproached herself for this negligence. Like all those who feel themselves supremely happy, she could not forbear speculating on the uncertain tenure by which she held this cherished happiness—could not help picturing to herself casualties and dangers and possibilities, and wondering what she should do if any fearful dispensation should separate them for ever. With a woman's self-abnegation, she had hitherto looked upon herself as the chief sufferer, had remembered the only refuge for human sorrow, the only altar on which to lay a broken heart. To-day, for the first time, she knew not why, it occurred to her what would become of Gilbert in any possible catastrophe if his grief should equal her own. He had not the same resources, the same aid. Why had she not taught him where to look while there was yet time, before he left her? She almost regretted now her determination that he should absent himself for a stated period. She wished—oh, how longingly—that she had him back all to herself, to cherish and care for and lead on the heavenward path. What was pride now, or prudence, or common sense, as compared to his welfare? Then it was anxious, weary work, this long absence, uncheered even by a single letter. True, she had herself expressly forbidden him to write, but surely—surely—he might have disobeyed her. She did not think she would have been so *very* angry. Perhaps he had not thought of it. Perhaps he had no leisure. Ah! if she had been in his place, she would not have been deterred by want of time or means; no, nor by an express prohibition. But of course he could not care for her as she did for him—that was out of the question. Would she wish it? Yes, she began to think she would.

What self-torturers they are! You see that even in Ada's

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cup, brimming as it was, lurked the bitter drop which, more or less, qualifies the sweetness of every earthly draught. You may stud the goblet with gems, or wreath it with flowers, and fill it with nectar to the edge, there is a fine tonic flavour somewhere, do what you will. Quaff it off thankfully, nevertheless, and be glad that you can taste the sugar at all. For nine out of every ten of us the crystal is foul and the contents wormwood.

Twice a week, at an early hour, Ada went to Belgrave Square. On these red-letter days she instructed Lady Gertrude in her own art, for it is needless to state that the lessons had been resumed immediately on the pupil's return to town, much to the delight of the mistress. She had often argued the point in her own mind, as to whether it was judicious thus to familiarise herself with Gilbert's family, and almost always came to the conclusion at which she wished to arrive—namely, that it was advisable to do so by every means in her power. In the first place, should it ever be her lot to reach the summit of earthly happiness—which, like all other summits, came to look more and more practicable the oftener she contemplated it—she would prefer that they should have become thoroughly acquainted with her in her professional character, and accept her, if they accepted her at all, as the humble teacher whom they had been good enough to patronise (there was no little pride in this, Ada, if you only knew it). In the second, if, as was too possible, something should occur to dash the cup of happiness from her lips, was it not well to rivet every link and strengthen every tie that could connect her by the power of association with those to whom he belonged? The latter consideration was seldom absent from her mind. There were times when it seemed impossible that such a dream as hers could be realised; when all sorts of contingencies would force themselves upon her; when she could not but mistrust the influence of absence, time, circumstances, fate itself, and wonder what she should do then. Fancy being told that she was to see Gilbert no more! She felt it would go near to break her heart; and there would be but one consolation left to have identified herself with all belonging to him. There are hot and cold fits in love as in the ague. Ada turned out of Halkin Street, as I have said, in the full glow of the former, but her moral teeth chattered, so to speak, and her moral being shivered all over ere she arrived at her destination in Belgrave Square. She was earlier than usual, indeed, Mrs. Latimer was always somewhat fidgety on these Tuesdays and Thursdays; and as she entered the hall she

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heard Lady Gertrude's voice on the stairs inquiring if the post had come in, and distinctly caught the words "Australian mail," addressed to someone in the back drawing-room. The bare mention of that dependency brought Ada's heart into her mouth, and she was so nervous when Lady Gertrude sat down to her music-book, that she could hardly turn over the leaves.

Her ladyship, too, was restless and uneasy. To do him justice, Gilbert, during his absence, had been pretty regular in his correspondence with his cousin. She looked forward to these yellow ship-letters with an eager longing. It would have been flattering to Mr. Orme, could he have seen how the dark eyes flashed as she tore them open; how the straight brows knit (Lady Gertrude's brows were a little too straight) as she devoured them, page by page; and how the whole countenance softened ever and anon at the description of some bush adventure, or colonial sport, shared with his friend. Also he might have been a little puzzled to account for the look of disappointment with which some of these epistles were closed, and the dreamy listlessness which would overcome that otherwise energetic young lady for days after their perusal.

On the present occasion, she was peculiarly inattentive and preoccupied. She sung false, and played too fast, at last she shut up the pianoforte, and turned to her instructress—

"I am out of tune to-day," she said, "a little out of temper, too, perhaps. Oh, Mrs. Latimer, I wish I were you!"

"Why?" asked the latter, whose own state of beatitude, conscious as she was of it herself, did not seem to her so obvious to the world in general.

"Because you are always the same," was the emphatic reply; "because you never seem to me to have worries like other people. You never look flurried, or hurried, or disordered. You are always in harmony. I do not believe, now, that you have an anxiety in the world."

Ada shook her head, perhaps a little sadly. She ought not to feel so, she knew it; and yet who so anxious, who so restless, who sometimes so discontented as herself?

"I have been disappointed to-day," resumed Lady Gertrude, "annoyed, provoked! Here's another mail come in, I know it's arrived, for there's the Sydney paper, and no letter from Gilbert—Mr. Orme, I mean—so thoughtless, so unfeeling. Isn't it too bad of him?"

She turned her piercing eyes full upon her listener while she spoke. Ada's heart began to beat very fast; her colour

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came and went; she looked as if she "had worries like other people."

"When did you hear last?" she gasped; for she must say something, though she knew quite well; having, indeed, on that occasion considerably out-stayed her time, once more exciting harrowing speculations in the infant minds at Bayswater, to hear tidings of his welfare.

Lady Gertrude had a way of not answering questions which seemed to her irrelevant. She was, moreover, a little surprised at the manifest agitation displayed by the music-mistress. So she pursued the thread of her own reflections, keeping her bright eyes fastened the while on the face of the other, who winced, and flushed, and faltered beneath her gaze.

"The only way I can account for it," said she, "is that he may possibly have arrived in person by this mail. Even if he has, it is stupid and inconsiderate not to write a line from Southampton to say so. Perhaps he means to surprise us, and walk in with a long beard, as if he had dropped from the clouds! Let me see, he might have landed last night, and come by the ten o'clock train, which would bring him here just about now. What fun if he did! There's a cab stopping at the door at this moment. Good gracious, Mrs. Latimer! you look as if you were going to faint. Let me ring the bell."

Poor Ada! no wonder she turned pale; no wonder these voluble surmises of her pupil, and the suggested surprise, which after all did not seem so impossible, took away her breath! She prevented the bell being rung, and summoned all her forces to stand upright and take her leave forthwith, vowing "that she was quite well, quite well, only a little heated, the fire was so powerful; and that she was already very late. Good-morning; Lady Gertrude would be in better voice another day. She must really not lose a minute; she must be gone."

I wonder if anything on earth would have tempted Ada to remain and risk the interview for which she had longed so many weary months. She felt almost as if she had rather never see him again, than risk a first meeting in the presence of others, especially this sharp-eyed cousin, of whom, truth to tell, she was always a little jealous, and a little afraid. She had pictured to herself a quiet drama confined to two performers, of which the scene should be the spot where they parted in Kensington Gardens. She had even determined in her own mind how he would look, and what he would say. She had settled it all. He would come back true as ever, and

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would be a little hurt and disappointed to find her so cold, so formal; then he would ask her if indeed absence had taught her to forget him? and she would remind him of their compact, and free him once more, and bid him be happy with someone better suited to him; and tell him she had done all for the best for both their sakes. Then he would be angry and violent, and reproach her, vowing to leave her for ever, and she would be sure (as if she were not sure now) that he was still the same. How delicious it would be to give way entirely then, and confess herself his own here and hereafter. But this charming little programme could not be conveniently carried out with Lady Gertrude for audience; and Ada was not without that strange instinct of womanhood, the first impulse of which seems to be to fly from what it most desires. So she collected her gloves, handkerchief, and music-roll, with trembling haste, and hurrying from the room, confronted—Lady Olivia.

Now it is hardly necessary to observe that the demeanour of that austere lady towards those whom she was pleased to consider her inferiors, was the reverse of engaging; and that one of the labours of love in which Mrs. Latimer especially delighted, was the endurance of Lady Olivia's condescension and patronage with edifying humility, for her son's sake. On the present occasion the greeting was more severe and majestic than usual; nor, as the music-mistress hurried downstairs with trembling steps, could she avoid hearing the elder lady's comments on her unseemly departure.

"Well, I'm sure," observed that exemplary person, in her loudest and harshest tones; "people's time must be very valuable, to go away in such a whirlwind! and whatever her musical proficiency may be, I can't compliment you, my dear, on the manners of your mistress."

Lady Gertrude's rejoinder to this unprovoked attack, though probably none of the meekest, was, however, inaudible in the hall.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE VEILED IMAGE

ADA hastened home. She felt it absolutely necessary to seek composure in her own room. With all her self-command, on which she plumed herself not a little—with all her womanly pride and reticence—she was not proof against the possibility of his return on whom she had pondered so continuously, though so unconsciously, all those weary months. She began to feel at last, what she had hitherto hardly realised, that every thought and action of her daily life had borne reference to him. She could not buy a ribbon without choosing the colour he preferred; she could not cross the street without encountering some object that associated itself with Gilbert. Wet or dry, storm or sunshine, she never missed her walk in Kensington Gardens, never failed to stand in the same place, to conjure up the same vision, till her heart thrilled with a sensation that was very nearly pain. It was pleasant even to toil the week through at those never-ending tasks, and to feel that the discipline and the self-denial made her more worthy of her love; it was intense happiness, on the day of rest, to have nothing else to do but to pray for him, and long for him, and think of him incessantly from morning till night.

When Alderman Jones' friend Plumber, or the enterprising gentleman who manages the affairs of Stirling Brothers, consigns the produce of a West Indian estate to the treacherous ocean, he does not think well to heap the whole of his venture—his rums, his sugars, his molasses, and his mangoes—in one cargo, for transport by one frail barque, however well found in the appliances of her class. When good Dame Trot rides the blind mare to market, she does not judge it expedient to put all her eggs in the same basket. On the contrary, the goods of the cautious Plumber or the far-seeing Stirlings float on

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various bottoms over the greedy wave, so that the loss on sugars may be balanced by the gain on rum; so that if the molasses go down, the mangoes ride triumphantly into port. Also, thrifty Dame Trot, warned by previous downfalls of the blind mare, while she carries some of her eggs with the cheese and butter in the basket on her arm, consigns the fresh-laid ones, pink and transparent at their ends, to the care of her honest Gaffer trudging safely afoot by the highway, scanning with critical eye the well-tilled glebe, a shrewd man and a cautious, taking thought in his dealings, but standing word to his bargains, a willing husbandman, and not averse to beer.

Warned by these wise examples, it is judicious to carry out the principle *divide et impera* in the moral world. As a general rule, ladies, I would say, cut up your affections into small parcels, neatly made up, and tied with a breastknot or a tress of hair. Distribute these samples impartially amongst your admirers—the more the merrier, of course, for the greater the number the less the size, and consequently the risk, of each individual packet. If Jack is false or unfortunate, or makes himself ridiculous, either of which causes is sufficient reason for dropping him at once, what matter? Tom, Harry, and the rest, preserving each his share, make up a fair aggregate. Tom, Harry, and the rest will console you sufficiently, if indeed consolation be required. Think of what your plight would have been if Jack had carried the whole freight, and so gone down. Limp, dejected, your hair in plain bands, and without an atom of crinoline, you must have wandered by the willows, a maiden all forlorn, instead of queening it still in bower and ballroom, radiant, captivating, *bouffée*, and heartless. As for poor Jack, never mind him, though he may be in prison, or in disgrace, or gone to the wars, or the dogs, or the devil; that is his affair, not yours. Everybody knows that men have no feeling; that cigars, race-horses, or campaigning, will console them for the most harrowing disappointments; and even if poor Jack should go down in the front rank, to be stripped of that little packet aforesaid, only when the broad breast on which it nestled is cold for evermore, that is his own stupid fault. Why could he not take a leaf out of your book, impartial fair one? To soar aloft, false, flattered, and unscathed rather than thus to fall, true-hearted and alone.

Alas for Ada! that she was not one of these wiser sisters. Alas for her! that her cargo was heaped and stowed away by deck and hold, till the waters lipped the gunwale,

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that the eggs were crowding and hurtling in the narrow basket, and never a one left to tempt the bird back to her cold empty nest, when she had spread her wings and flown away.

The dove fluttered home to her cage, and sat down to think, to brood over her coming happiness, and stifle the misgivings that *would* cast their shadows athwart the promise of the sunny future. On her table lay a letter addressed to her in the handwriting of an agent with whom she had not corresponded for years. In good truth, Ada's bankers sustained no heavy load of responsibility. Carelessly she opened the envelope, and its enclosure fell out upon the floor. As the sealed side turned uppermost, she perceived it was a ship-letter; and concluding that it could have come from but one correspondent over the water, her eyes filled with tears of joy as she pressed it eagerly to her heart before tearing it open to devour the contents. Then she read on, word by word and line by line, to the very end. Here it is:—

“DEAREST ADA,—You will, I fancy, be surprised to see my handwriting once more; and I hope you will forgive me any pain I may have caused you by one of those dodges that the pressure from without obliged me to practise, much against my will. I am an honest fellow enough, I believe, as times go; and had I not learned that you still bear my name, I would never have troubled you again, but kept dark on my own hook, and allowed you to believe that poor old Will had gone under once for all. Well, dear, the water has been over my head many a long day, but I've come up pretty dry notwithstanding. You know I always had a knack of getting afloat again after a capsizing. Bad times I have had of it since I saw my own name amongst the deaths in the Sydney papers; but it is a long lane that has no turning; and things have come round of late better than I had reason to expect. I shall have some queer stories to tell you when we meet—for meet we shall, Ada, I am determined, and that before very long. I have purchased some lots up the country that answer considerably better than my first venture; and I am not one of those people who wish to go on buying experience all their lives. I shall hold on for a favourable time, and then realise. If the thing comes off as I expect, I shall land a pretty good stake, and come straight home. Will you take me back, Ada? and let bygones be bygones? I sometimes think you had a hardish time of it, my dear; but we have both of us seen a deal of rough usage since then; and I hope it will be different in future. I've had to work hard for my plunder; and they shan't skin me again, not if I know it. I sometimes think I'll be with you before the cuckoo begins to sing; and I feel somehow as if it would do me good to see Old England and your kind face once again. I've got your bracelet, Ada, still; I've stuck by it through many a rough job; but I never thought to see its owner again.

“I came through the bush a while ago with a chap that knew you and heard you sing. His name is Gordon, a likely lad enough, and one of the right sort, but uncommon sharp. However, he did me a good turn camping out one night; and I never forget either the man that puts me on, or the man that lets me in. He had a pal with him who beats me altogether: they call him Orme, a tiptop swell, and a face I remembered to have seen before in the old country. He's mad, I guess, for he never speaks to anyone, and a man wouldn't give a hundred dollars to speak to him. He's got a cross game look about him, for as mild as he is.

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Poor chap, I think he's had bad news from England, for when I was bragging to him about going home, he turned quite white, and trembled. He's not one of the chicken-hearted ones, neither. But this makes no odds to you or to me.

"Don't expect me, Ada, till you see me. You remember of old I never could bear to be tied to time. But be sure I shall come home before the fall, and that I am always your very affectionate,

WILLIAM LATIMER.

"SYDNEY, 18th."

She had the courage of a lion, that gentle Ada. She read every word of her letter over again, examined the postmark, compared it with the date, folded it, locked it away in her desk, and then tottering across the room, caught at the back of a chair to save herself from falling on the floor. As she did so she saw her own white face in the glass, and wondered vaguely whether those parted lips and dull protruding eyes could belong to Ada Latimer. It was no question now of vexation, or sorrow, or resistance—no case of accepting or refusing the bitter draught, or disguising its taste, or otherwise making the best of it. Not so. The hammer had fallen. At one blow it had shivered the goblet into a thousand particles, and the liquid—good, bad, or indifferent—had vanished soaking in the plain. Not a fragment nor a drop remained.

For a minute or so the feeling of suffocation, I mean the physical feeling, was unbearable. She strove to cry aloud, but nothing came of it save an inarticulate gasp. She put her hands to her throat, turning wildly round and round like a dumb animal caught in a noose. Then she sank upon her knees—her shoulders heaved, her bosom sobbed to bursting. With the first cry for mercy came the saving tears; and so the crisis of a lifetime was past.

I will leave her alone with her sorrow. There are griefs for which it is mockery to offer consolation. There are losses to which bereavement by death were comparatively a gain. So long as a single strand of rope holds, the human heart will cling to it, and trust in it, as if it were an iron cable. So long as ever the past belongs to us, there is a dry spot on which the dove can rest her foot. Alas! for her when she must flit aimlessly to and fro over the dark waters. Alas! when that which might have been is but a maddening impossibility, when that which has been is but a baseless and uncertain dream. Whilst memory remains we are not all alone. Far, far back in the gloomy perspective sits the immovable image, a long way off, indeed, but yet existent; and its glance,

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cold and stony though it be, turned upon us still. Woe to the utter desolation that is fain to veil the statue of the goddess! Woe to the hand, cold and pitiless as the marble itself, that must needs draw the kerchief

“O'er the eyes of Mnemosyne there.”

CHAPTER XXXII

EBB AND FLOW

BELLA JONES has had no pleasant winter. That young lady is beginning to find out that life is not all a journey downhill in the sunshine. On her, too, is breaking the chill suspicion that childhood, notwithstanding its little restraints and sorrows, may have been the best season, after all. That to be grown-up means to be put to work, to carry a certain burden, which must, moreover, be carried erect and with a bold front, which is also constantly increasing in sad disproportion to the strength that year by year fails ever such a little, and which no one seems inclined to help his brother wayfarer to bear more easily.

“There’s none will weep for thy distress,
Though friends stand firm and true ;
For in the tangled wilderness
They bleed and battle too.”

Bella, like many another warrior, takes her place in the combat with a confident face and a sinking heart. She has much to contend with. The alderman, under the combined influence of gout and anxiety, has become testy and irritable. He will not bear to be questioned about his affairs, nor listen for an instant to any of his daughter’s schemes for retrenchment. At the same time he allows her, as he has always done, to take the entire management of his household.

“Nonsense, Bella,” is his invariable reply to her expostulation ; “girls can’t be expected to understand these things. Never show your hand, my dear, whether you’ve four by honours or haven’t a single trump. All you have got to mind is to return your partner’s lead ; so let me hear no more about it, but do as I bid you.”

She has, nevertheless, her own plans of economy and self-denial. Amongst other gloomy forebodings, she looks forward to the day when her father’s servants must be dismissed, and

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when their present establishment must be reduced to the narrowest possible limits. In anticipation of this evil time, Bella thinks it well to go marketing regularly with Mrs. Garnish, thereby putting a considerable check on that confidential servant's expenditure, the while she herself gets a good many valuable lessons in the difficult art of making both ends meet. Mrs. Garnish, I need hardly observe, disapproves highly of this practice, but submits the more quietly that she has herself certain suspicions of the coming storm, and having already feathered her nest pretty handsomely, is quite prepared to leave the tree so soon as it ceases to shelter her from the wind. Three times a week Bella, in a plain straw hat and quiet gown, was used to accompany that domestic at an early hour to the shops of the different tradespeople, thereby largely reducing the amount of the weekly bills, and giving much dissatisfaction to all concerned.

Thus it fell out that on a certain bleak spring morning, of which mention has been already made, Miss Jones and her attendant, pervading the streets of that rural city which lies at the back of the Regent's Park, encountered, at the door of a baker's shop, no less a person than Lord Holyhead; and his lordship, whose mind, though certainly not wax to receive, was doubtless of the order which is marble to retain, stopped to greet her with marked cordiality and delight. Holyhead had not forgotten the episode of the parrot, and never recurred to it without a pleasant recollection of the frank, warm-hearted girl who had tended him so gently, and bound up his wounds with such chirurgical skill. He quite started with pleasure when he caught sight of her, and leaping from his horse, led the animal by the bridle while he accompanied Miss Jones along the footway, a proceeding which considerably discomfited Mrs. Garnish, but drew down marks of decided disapproval from a London urchin, who was watching his lordship's movements.

"I have not set eyes on you for months," said Holyhead, in his kindest tones. "How lucky to come across you at an hour when I thought ladies were in their first sleep. Why, what an early bird you are, Miss Jones!"

"I am out marketing," she answered good-humouredly; "perhaps you didn't know that was one of my accomplishments. I can buy beef and mutton by the pound, and can tell the weight of a chicken without asking for it to be put in the scales. I've made a capital bargain this morning. Would you like to see what I've got in the basket?"

Mrs. Garnish, who had her own ideas of good-breeding, and



"He accompanied Miss Jones along the footway."

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who held the article above-mentioned, turned on her young mistress a look of angry expostulation.

"I wish I might carry it for you," said he, "and take a lesson in so useful an art. But is this only a freak for once? or do you really go out every morning on these foraging expeditions?"

If Lord Holyhead asked this invidious question with a view of facilitating future meetings like the present, he must have been a little disappointed by the grave, unconscious tone of Bella's reply.

"Yes," she said; "and glad I am to be able to do so. I can be of very little use to my father, I fear; but it is not my fault that I was born a woman. If I were a man I should be at some harder work than this. Oh, how I wish it was all so different!"

He saw she was uneasy in mind, and partly guessed the cause. He was better acquainted than she knew with her father's affairs, and indeed had his own share in some of the alderman's ventures. He talked on of indifferent subjects for a while, but showed no inclination to get into the saddle again, although they were now returning to the vicinity of Verbena Villa. Bella had evidently something on her mind. Her manner was constrained, her replies absent and inconsequent. As she neared her home she seemed to nerve herself for an effort. At last she made a plunge, as it were, and got out what she had to say.

"Oh! Lord Holyhead," stammered Bella, gaining confidence from the vicinity of the garden-gate, "I have never been able to thank you for your great kindness last year. I am afraid you must think me very ungrateful; but, indeed, I heard of it, and whenever I have seen you, I have always wanted to tell you how much I—how much we all—felt it. Somehow, I never could get it out till to-day. Thank you *really*. Good-bye."

She was close to the gate now, and put out her hand, blushing bright scarlet. He pressed it very cordially, and wishing her good-bye, jumped on his horse, and was off; nor could Bella have adopted a more expeditious method of getting rid of her cavalier, Lord Holyhead being one of those gentlemen whose insuperable objection to being thanked is the less accountable that they are in the constant habit of perpetrating actions for which thanks can be their only payment.

He had ridden the same road once before with his bridle-hand neatly bound up in a silk handkerchief. It was some

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months ago, yet had he not forgotten how certain vague ideas crossed his mind then, which bore reference to the Villa, the parrot, and other possessions of Alderman Jones. The same current of thought, brighter, more engrossing, yet perhaps not quite so pleasant, took possession of him now. On some minds the force of contrast has a stronger effect than even the influence of association; and Lord Holyhead, as he rode soberly along at a foot's pace, with his rein dangling loose on the neck of his astonished hack, called up in his mind's-eye a picture to which Bella Jones, with her fresh morning colour and her quiet morning toilet, above all, with her frank simplicity and honest diffidence, was as different as light from darkness.

It was not so long since he had been sitting in a luxurious and beautiful little room, furnished with every appliance that could be thought of for comfort and amusement, rich in gaudy colours and costly ornaments, which, though not invariably in the best taste, were of high price and indisputable beauty. Groups of choice little statuettes filled the corners, and prints of well-known artists, dramatic and otherwise, adorned the walls. Books, music, flowers, were scattered about the room, and a large pianoforte encumbered its somewhat contracted dimensions, a pianoforte over which Holyhead had ere this hung enraptured, drinking in its tones, as if such draughts were drained from a fountain always sweet, always inexhaustible. A blazing fire gave an air of home to all this brilliancy; and the out-of-doors view, not very engaging in cold spring weather, was shut out by pyramids of exotics, completely blocking up the windows. Enters on this luxurious little scene a stout, dark-browed lady, with her shining bands of hair pressed closely to her temples, and an ominous frown, harbinger of stormy weather, lowering on her forehead. She has the sallow complexion and black piercing eyes of the south; also the sharp, shrill tones of the Italian voice, which, although capable of being modulated by art into the sweetest of music, commonly strikes harsh and disagreeable on the ear in ordinary conversation. She flounces in, without taking notice of Holyhead, sweeps her hand over the keys of the instrument with practised skill, trills off a *roulade* that makes the window-glasses ring again, and sinking into an easy-chair by the fire, puts her feet upon the fender, disclosing a creased stocking and a slipper down-at-heel, while she gives vent to a yawn of such capacious energy as betrays an amount of *ennui* by no means complimentary to her companion.

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Holyhead looks as if he meditated departure, but did not exactly know how to set about it. The lady stares at him contemptuously for a minute or so, pulls a bunch of keys and a letter out of her pocket, and flinging the latter in his lap, says in no mellifluous accent, "Take it. Read me, then, that. What does that mean to say?"

Holyhead recognises the hand of a gentleman with whom he has already had no little correspondence; it is, indeed, from the manager of a great theatre, declining to make any advance on the liberal offer he has tendered the star. As his lordship, with her own consent, had previously closed the bargain for her on these very terms, he is not surprised that an adherence to the contract should be required, and he says as much, pretty decidedly.

"Bah!" returns the lady, with an emphasis on the monosyllable that an Englishwoman could never effect; "he seems to forget I make my own affair—who saved him last year from bankruptcy? who filled the house night after night, though Coronella sang false through a whole opera, and Tamboretto was as hoarse as a crow? Terms! I make my own terms. What does he mean by terms? Effectively, he is stupid, this man!"

"But, my dear signora," interposed the nobleman, with more meekness than was his wont, "I wrote to you in Italy, and you were quite satisfied with the agreement. You yourself bade me accept it on your behalf; I am compromised in this matter as well as you. I think you ought to consider this. Fair play is a jewel!"

"What signifies that?" retorted the siren; "I did not then know the offer that Garotte would make me from St. Petersburg, nor the share I might have had in La Scala, if I had not tied myself to this odious country. What a place! what people! what a climate! what infamous coffee! *Enfin*, I shall abandon the whole engagement and go back."

Holyhead was inexpressibly provoked. There is scheming and there is intrigue behind the imitative scenes of a theatre, as within the actual walls of a court. Who knows what amount of trouble, and civility, and subservience, foreign to his real nature, he had lavished to effect the arrangement which he now saw on the point of subversion? Bravoura entertained no mean opinion of her own powers; in fact, it was whispered that the celebrated singer considerably over-rated her talents, and the manager was satisfied that he could have got sweeter notes for less money elsewhere. He was willing, however, to oblige Holyhead, nor was he averse to a

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name that still looked so attractive in the bills; accordingly, he concluded a treaty of extreme liberality on his own part, and now he felt he was unfairly used in being required to bid more than the article was worth. Holyhead appreciated his sentiments, and shared his indignation.

"You will not," said he, controlling his temper with an effort; "you will think better of it, signora, if only on my account."

"*Qui vivra verra,*" answered the lady with a peculiar expression of brow and lip that he well knew; "I sent for my passport yesterday afternoon."

She had done the same thing on more than one previous occasion, and had only been induced to stay by great personal entreaty and pecuniary sacrifices. He determined to try firmness for once and abide the result.

"You will be in Paris, then, by Sunday," said he, pretty calmly; "will you do two or three little commissions for me?"

She swept a choice porcelain vase filled with flowers off the table at her elbow, as if by accident, but the gleam in her dark Italian eyes denoted the storm would break ere long.

"I shall only go through Paris from one station to the other. I long so to be back in my dear Italy."

"Then I won't trouble you," said Holyhead. "You must have a great deal to do; I will order my horse and wish you adieu," he added, moving towards the bell.

The signora's hand shook visibly, and her deep bosom heaved under her somewhat untidy morning dress. This was not what she wanted at all. She had no more intention of going to Italy than she had of losing her theatrical engagement, but she wanted to be implored to stay, and that her acquiescence should be made a great favour of, and serve as a pretext for the indulgence of a thousand future whims, including a certain fairy carriage with cream-coloured ponies, on which she had set her heart. She took, moreover, a delight in tormenting Holyhead, which none but her own sex can understand. She was under countless obligations to him. He had stood her friend for years, and she liked him just well enough to enjoy vexing him. She snatched the bell-rope from his hand, and pointed to a chair in her noblest tragedy attitude, with stiffened arm and downturned wrist.

"Sit down," she screamed; "we do not part like this. How dare you use me thus?"

Then the storm burst, in French, in English, in Italian, in

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woman's universal language of gasps, and sobs, and tears. She accused him of heartlessness, of injustice, of mistrust; in one breath, of neglecting her interests; in the next, of domineering over her actions. She would never have come to England but for him. He had never influenced her in the least in England or elsewhere, and never should; but it was cruel, it was base, it was infamous, not to advise her now in her need, and assist her in her negotiations. Then she ingeniously put *him* in the wrong, vowing that it was his over-rated opinion of her that made her break with her good friend the manager; that it was in accordance with what she believed to be his wishes, she had written to increase her demands; but how could she know what he liked if he never told her, if he never came near her, if he neglected her and left her to do everything for herself? What had she to amuse her? Whom did she ever see? What a life was hers, *triste*, stupefying, *embêtante*. Theatres, diamonds, carriages, picnics, what were they to her? It was all Holyhead's fault, and she never could forgive him, not if he was to go down on his knees then and there to beg her pardon, which was the very least he could do. We need scarcely say that Nobs, as his familiars called him, was a most unlikely person to assume that humiliating posture. He did nothing of the kind, but he gave in nevertheless. By dint of promises and assurances, and a little scolding, and a good deal of soothing, the signora was induced for the present to postpone her departure for her native land, under the express stipulation, however, that she should not delay her flight an hour after her engagement was concluded. She longed so for Italy, dear Italy, the very day her theatre closed she should start. How fervently Holyhead hoped she would!

The fact is, he had endured rather too many of these scenes. If constant dropping will wear away a stone, it is no less true that the continual action of the element has, on the other hand, a petrifying tendency on the softer substances, and the fair sex are prone to forget that the most alarming demonstrations, when often repeated, must fail in their object of intimidation. Even the kettle-drum is powerless to rouse the metal of the equine philosopher on whose shoulders it is usually placed, and Holyhead's sentiments of late in a passage-of-arms with Bravoura had been simply suggestive of weariness while it lasted, and relief when it was over. Yet had he not strength of mind to free himself at once from the influence exerted by this overbearing and not very attractive lady. A thousand times he resolved nothing would be so

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easy as to break the imaginary bonds which held him ; a thousand times, from mingled motives of good-nature, indolence, and a certain manly consideration of the signora's *amour propre*, he paused on the eve of a rupture. He knew he had but to say a word, and it was done ; yet he hesitated, and every day the task became more difficult.

My little playfellow informs me that if you choose to be at the trouble of taking bold Chanticleer from roost in his first sleep, and will bring the astonished bird into a lighted room, you may amuse yourself with the following experiment. Place his beak upon the table, and from that beak draw a line with chalk in any direction you please, the infatuated fowl will not move his head from the spot until the chalk be rubbed out. Doubtless he believes firmly that he is made fast by the nose. My little playfellow cites this instance as an example of the want of wisdom in the gallinaceous tribe, but when my little playfellow gets older he may possibly see parallel cases of helplessness in the unfeathered biped. I think I know of more than one old cock, young cock, or cock of the game, whose tether is imaginary and yet restrictive as the line of white chalk—who lays his foolish beak down in some inconvenient spot, and though everyone else knows him to be as free as air, will not believe he can move an inch from it to save his life. Samson snapped the strongest fetters of the Philistine like withy bands, and yet I have little doubt but that Delilah could have held and bound the champion fast with a thread of her golden hair. Habit and indolence combined will sometimes weave a tie enduring as the very handcuff of necessity herself.

Holyhead was a widower ; like many another such, the failure of his first venture, to use Mr. Weller's appropriate expression, had rather stimulated than damped his hopes of a happier future. In his position, manly, good-looking, with a large fortune, a peeress's coronet at his disposal, he need have had little trouble in selecting some fair girl from any London ballroom, who would have been willing to share these advantages ; but it is almost as difficult to choose from too many as too few. Like the man who looks for a straight stick in the wood, his lordship found himself reaching the boundary of his quest without spying exactly what he wanted, and whilst one was too forward, another too shy, a third somewhat romantic, and a fourth a little affected, he had gradually accustomed himself to the society of Bravoura and her set, till his male friends opined in their discrimination that "Nobs would never marry at all."

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He had his own ideal, nevertheless, as most men have. Holyhead's was an artless, unaffected, good-humoured girl, more comely than handsome, more frank than *maniérée*; young, fresh, untutored, and altogether a fitter mistress for the old place in Yorkshire, than the town house he let by the season in Grosvenor Square. Of the same species and the same sex, there could scarcely have been found two individuals so different as the Signora Bravoura, of all the principal theatres in Europe, and Miss Isabella Jones, Verbena Villa, Regent's Park. I do not affirm that Lord Holyhead traced the slightest resemblance between them as he rode slowly away down the long perspective of Portland Place.

Bella goes home rather fluttered and pleased with her morning walk; rather more impatient than usual of the narrowing circumstances which she foresees must ere long shut her completely out from those brilliant circles of which she has had an occasional glimpse. She is the last young woman on earth to plead guilty to nerves, yet the parrot's screams appear more discordant than usual, and she muffles him, so to speak, with a shawl, covering his cage, much to his disgust, and leaving him with a crust and a lump of sugar, in total darkness, at eleven o'clock in the day. She has but little time, however, to consult her own comforts or inclinations. The alderman's breakfast must be prepared, and she must herself preside at that meal, supplying his wants with her own hands, and lending a patient ear to his details concerning his gout and other infirmities, glad at any sacrifice to keep him off the distressing subject that is nearest both their hearts. *Podagra* is not an amusing topic for a girl of twenty, nor is it advisable for a patient of threescore to dwell upon the various symptoms of his malady; but when there is a skeleton in the house, even the proprietors are fain to cover it up with whatever rags come most readily to hand; and the nearest relatives had better drivel on in the emptiest of conversation, acting their several parts with studious forbearance, than advert to a topic on which they are sure to disagree. After breakfast she takes him out for a walk in the brightest part of the day. The alderman, like most energetic men, is an extremely wilful and obstinate patient, one of those who resolutely decline the pill unless it be sufficiently gilded; and although his doctor tells him walking exercise is indispensable (indis—pensable, observes the sage, as if he were propounding some new and startling discovery in the theory that air and movement are necessary to the well-being of

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man), without Bella's arm and Bella's company he could scarcely be induced to step over the threshold. So the good daughter walks out with him day after day, postponing all her own little occupations and amusements to the convenience of papa.

I think the old seldom sufficiently appreciate the forbearance and attentions of the young. Filial duty apart, I think I ought to feel under considerable obligations to my junior when he puts off his pleasures or his excitements to sit and listen to my platitudes, when he consents to sacrifice the poetry of his young life to my unquestionable prose. His society is to me like some reviving cordial, a sip of the cup that was once so strong and sparkling, that I drained so greedily, with such a noble thirst. Mine to him must, I fear, be at best but an anodyne, a draught that affects him as would "the drowsy syrups of the East." He is a willing listener; alas! I fear I ride him on occasion much too hard. I marvel he does not yawn at that story I have told him so often about Brummel and the Brighton coach. I wonder whether he really believes in my short-tailed grey horse, or the retriever that was drowned the day we heard of Waterloo, or my famous innings at St. Alban's, off Catapult's bowling, when the last of the Cæsars was a boy? Does he consider me a deliberate and circumstantial liar, or only a fond foolish old man, whose memory runs away with him? At least he is patient under the infliction, kind, gentle, and considerate; at least I owe him thanks for riveting one of those links which are parting so fast between myself and the world that is passing away from me. When he goes back to his horse, or his cricket, or his sweetheart, he will not, I think, be the less light-hearted, or the less successful that he has smoothed a few yards of the old man's downhill path towards his grave.

Rusticus expectat dum defluit amnis. The crossing of Oxford Street, when they extended their walk so far, is always to Bella a subject of grave and nervous responsibility. The alderman's infirmity, and his obstinacy in ignoring it, render him a likely object to become the victim of reckless driving; and his daughter, like the Roman rustic who pauses till the river shall have flowed by, that he may cross over dryshod, is fain to wait many a weary minute ere she dare venture her charge in the stream of carriages, omnibuses, and cabs, which seem to roll on in a continuous and eternal tide. One of the latter passes close to father and daughter as they stand on the footway. Its inmate stops the driver with unusual

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vehemence, but he has shaken both father and daughter by the hand, and greeted them in the kindly voice they have never forgotten, ere either recognises in that worn, haggard face, with its bronzed skin and large beard, the features of their dandy friend, Gilbert Orme. He is indeed much altered; he has acquired that restless, anxious look which so soon stamps age on the countenance; and had it not been for the full sweet tones, pleasing and musical as ever, even Bella would have failed to recognise him. She blushed, however, as she did so; Bella's blushes were easily forthcoming when she was interested; and, rather to her own surprise, she asked him news of John Gordon, in the very first sentence. I have my own opinion that while she did so, Miss Jones found out something she had never suspected before.

"He came to town with me this morning," answered Gilbert, "and has only gone to his lodgings to dress in decent clothes. He will be at the Villa before you can get back."

There was something in his tone that struck both his listeners, although each was naturally preoccupied with the intelligence it conveyed. Bella's heart beat fast as she thought she was so soon to see John Gordon, yet was she a little surprised it did not beat faster; and I question if she looked forward to the interview with half the anxiety of her father. Nevertheless, the first thought of the kind-hearted old man was for his young friend—

"You look ill, Orme," said he anxiously, "very ill. Have you kept clear of these fevers? Is there anything the matter?"

Gilbert laughed, but it struck even Bella there was something very forced and hollow in his laugh.

"Never was better!" he answered, in a loud voice that arrested the attention of the passers-by. "I need not ask after you, or Gertrude, or my mother; I suppose they are all well. I suppose I shall see them by and by."

"Are you not going there now?" said Bella, more than ever struck with his strange look, and wondering the while whether John Gordon had reached the Villa, and would wait till they returned from their walk.

"No," he answered, speaking through his set teeth, like a man in pain; "I have something to do first. I cannot stay. I am glad to have seen you. I must not wait any longer; good-bye. Drive on," he added to the cabman, "and make haste, there's a good fellow;" muttering, as he sank back into the cab, "You will get there soon enough; you will get

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there soon enough. What have I done to deserve this punishment?"

Bella and her father hastened homewards to the Regent's Park; on their way they encountered Lord Holyhead once again; and Bella's dark eyes brightened considerably as she smiled her acknowledgments of his lordship's very marked and deferential salute. She tripped on with a lighter step than usual after that courtesy, chatting gaily with her father; and her coming interview with the returning traveller seemed to grow less and less formidable every minute. A year ago she could not have faced John Gordon half so coolly after an absence of eight-and-forty hours. Do not blame her therefore. We cannot all be mirrors of constancy and fidelity. In a world of change like ours, it is surely better to be less immutable than impressionable, to be more alive to the influence of the present than the past. It may be heresy in love, but it is sound common sense nevertheless in common life. Shall everything around you change? The trees, the climate, the surface of the country! Shall you, yourself, as your doctor tells you, lose your own corporeal identity by the process of waste and supply once in every seven years, and shall your sentiments and affections, madam, undergo no corresponding mutations? Forbid it all the prescriptive rights and privileges of womanhood! Remember his Seneschal's sage advice to the noble Moringer—

"Seven twelvemonths, did I say?
I'll pledge me for no lady's faith
Beyond the seventh fair day!"

In a hansom cab, rattling and bounding at a gallop towards the Edgware Road, is one who had better have changed like the veriest dog-vane, veering at every breath to every point, than sit as he does now, with closed jaw, and fixed eye, and cold, clenched hands, nerving himself like one who is about to meet his fate, and muttering below his breath, "You will get there soon enough! You will get there soon enough!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

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FOR a certain space of time, how long, or how short they never afterwards distinctly remembered, neither spoke more than a few commonplace words of courteous greeting. It needed no explanation to tell Gilbert that Mrs. Latimer knew all; that sad wistful face was more eloquent than the wildest exclamations; the resigned hopelessness of her bearing showed more of suffering than would a thousand complaints. She had expected him all day. Well she knew that he would hurry to her the very instant he arrived in London; and her unselfish heart ached more painfully for his misery than her own. She had desired that he might be admitted; she had resolved to grant him this one interview, to use her gentle influence as far as possible in softening the blow that was inevitable; and then, never to see him again. It was almost a relief to perceive by the expression of his face, that he must have made the same discovery as herself; it lightened her task ever such a little. How different from the meeting she had anticipated twenty-four hours ago! when she was to have given him up voluntarily with such ready generosity. Was it easier to give him up now, when the impassable gulf yawned between them? Was the treasure less valuable because she must never so much as think of it again?

She was the first to speak. Her heart was sore to see his altered looks, his pale worn face, on which grief and anxiety had set the marks as of physical pain. She remembered him so well in the prime of health and happiness and manly vigour. What a contrast now! She could scarce keep back her tears.

"You are ill?" she said, and her voice shook; while from an impulse she could not resist, she took his hand. "You look wretchedly. You are completely broken down. Oh, Gilbert, Gilbert, for my sake do not give way like this!"

It was too much. His heart was full; and even a man's pride was insufficient to control his weakness as he bent over

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the dear hand he had hoped to make his own. She had to find courage and strength for both. Who can tell what it cost her? Who can calculate the struggle that tore that fond true heart! It is set down in a book ruled with no earthly lines, and some day an angel will add it up, and place the score exulting on the credit side.

She broke from him, and unlocked her writing-desk. Taking out her husband's letter, she put it in Gilbert's hand without a word, nor once took her eyes off his face till he had read it through, refolded it, and returned it to her with the same silent gravity. There was neither astonishment, nor anger, nor reproach on his countenance, nothing but the sad hopeless sorrow that cut her to the soul. She wished he could blame her, argue with her, quarrel with her, anything rather than this dumb, piteous resignation. Once more, and, as it were, to break the spell, she forced herself to speak.

"You know all now," she said. "We have been the victims of a cruel deception; and yet perhaps he could not help it. Believe me, Mr. Orme, I have not injured you willingly. There is but one path before us. We must never meet again."

He raised his head stiffly. Those low grave tones were most unlike Gilbert's voice.

"Be it so," he replied. "At least I am consoled to see you can bear it so cheerfully. At least I am glad to be the only sufferer."

They were cruel words, and she felt them so; but she knew that men are unjust in proportion to the strength of their affections; and she could not bear to think that he should go away and never do her justice, never know the cost of her burnt-offering, purified by a fire that reduced to ashes the altar on which it was kindled.

"Do not say so," she answered, her eyes filling fast with tears. "Do not believe I am utterly without feeling, without heart. Do you think I can take a sponge at will and wipe out the past, as you wipe off the figures from a child's slate? Do you think I can forget last year, with its changes and its misgivings, and its surprise of unspeakable happiness? Do not make my duty too difficult for me to perform—do not make my burden too heavy for me to bear—do not force me to confess that my misery is more hopeless, my punishment heavier and more enduring than your own."

His face cleared and brightened in a moment. A beam of hope seemed to play on it once more. Something in Ada's

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tone that spoke of human longing and vain natural regret, seemed to call him, as it were, to the rescue. He was a man, and he argued like a man, pressing into his service all the considerations of sophistry, expediency, and precedent which might at least, he thought, persuade, if they were powerless to convince. He rose from his chair, and his whole exterior seemed to glow and change, whilst the full tones of the kindly voice smote sweetly, as of old, upon her ear. With all the impassioned energy of a man who is pleading for life and more than life, he urged upon her every argument that love could suggest to fly at once with him, and be his own for ever. He pleaded his faith, his truth, his fond obedience, above all, his altered condition now, and his future destruction if deprived of her. He was ready to leave England with her that minute—to change his name—to accompany her to the remotest corner of the earth, and there devote every hour of his life to her service. They would be so contented, so happy. With a fine climate and a beautiful country, and their own society, all the world to each other, life would be a rapturous dream. He drew such a picture of their future as dazzled even his own mental vision. Gilbert was never deficient in eloquence; and the advocate's own being was indeed wrapped up in his cause. Then he asked indignantly what it was, this obstacle, that stood in the way of more than earthly happiness? A right granted without consideration, and repudiated by the possessor's own deliberate act; an alliance never sanctioned by love, and dissolved by mutual consent of the contractors. Was this imaginary difficulty to embitter the whole future lives of two guiltless persons? Was a superstitious adherence to a vow made under mistaken conditions, and afterwards broken on the one part, to debar her for ever from the inheritance of every child of clay?—the sunshine of the soul that gladdens all alike, rich and poor, grand and lowly—that gives a zest to the beggar's coarsest food, and kindles a glow upon the peasant's fireless hearth? Was he to be the joint sufferer—he who had loved her as a thousand Latimers could never have done, to whom in her beauty she was the light of his life, the very air he breathed?

“Ada, Ada! you are mine in the sight of heaven. Will you sacrifice me to him?”

Since our Mother Eve was fain to listen to the whispers of the serpent, it seems woman's lot to be tempted, woman's lot to be in all cases the besieged and the assailed. Woe to her if she be defeated!—woe to her if she be surprised by

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a *coup-de-main*, or compelled to surrender at discretion! In either case, whilst the conqueror flings abroad his banner and trumpets forth his victory with all the honours of war, the vanquished must be enslaved, reviled, and humbled to the very dust. *Væ victis!* is the battle-cry of less unpolished savages than Brennus, of none more than the gentler sex themselves. I wonder on what principle of justice is founded the award that the less erring of two culprits should bear the whole punishment of their joint crime? I wonder in what page of the gospel I shall find authority for the conclusion, that the same offence is in man a venial folly, in woman an unpardonable sin? Is it brave and generous to trample down the weak, and truckle to the strong? Is it the Teacher's will that His disciples should be the first to "break the bruised reed and quench the smoking flax"? If so, then society, as at present constituted, is indeed established on a noble and Christianlike basis!

Tempted she was indeed, and who can tell how sorely? Yet did Ada come out of the furnace pure and radiant as an angel of light. It was hard to see him pleading there so eagerly, hard to know what must be the result of his failure in the one dear hope of his life, hardest of all to stifle the voice that cried for him so loudly in her own breast. Ada, too, was not deficient in imagination. She could picture to herself—oh, far too vividly—the happiness of a lot on which she must not even dare to think; could appreciate with a thrill that was not altogether painful the intense devotion that scrupled not for an instant to leave country and friends and kindred, and all for her sake; that would willingly and thankfully lose everything else so it gained but her. Men did not usually love like this. It was something to have found the treasure—alas, that it had been won only to be given up! *Her* visions, too, had been of a golden future, rich in all the blessings of domestic happiness and love; a future that to a woman—and such a woman as Ada—was a very type of heaven upon earth. Now that it was impossible she felt for the first time how she had cherished and leant upon this future—how she had made it the goal and the object of every thought and every action—how it had indeed become a part of her very existence, without which the life before her was a weary and barren waste.

Then it seemed so easy to make herself and him happy. What was the sacrifice of character and reputation and earthly honour? Nothing for his sake. Nay, it would be a pleasure to prove to him that she too could give up all for one she

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loved. The opportunity was present, the cage was open ; it seemed so easy to be free—so easy but for one consideration.

“Gilbert,” she said, and the loving look she bent upon him was pure from all earthly feeling, “Gilbert, you have often told me that my happiness was dearer to you than your own ; that you were capable of any effort, any sacrifice, for my welfare. It was my pride and pleasure to believe this, to know that you were different from others, to feel that I could trust you and depend upon you to the last. The time has come to put you to the proof. There is right, Gilbert, and there is wrong. Would you ask me to turn out of the path that leads to heaven even for your sake? Would you wish to see me lost body and soul? Oh, I know you better than that! You are generous and chivalrous and good. Assist me in my task, hard though it be. Join me in the painful effort. I need never then be ashamed of the past. Do not deprive me of my only consolation, but let me carry with me that memory pure and unsullied into another world.”

He could almost have consented then never to see her more. She had enlisted all his better feelings in the cause. Was she not worthy of any sacrifice, though it were his life's happiness, as she stood there so pure, so sorrowing, so lovable—the soft cheek so pale and wan, the tears gathering fast in those deep fond eyes? Had she been less beautiful she might have conquered. But no, he could not give her up—could not voluntarily resign her to another, his type of all that was most enslaving and attractive, his very ideal of womanly perfection both in body and mind. Right or wrong, if man could do it, he would win her still. He could not stand upon the heights that she had reached, nor breathe so pure an air as that refined exalted nature. There was an earthly leavening in his devotion, deep and absorbing though it was—a drop in the cup of his affection which, like some cunning poison, sweetened while it strengthened the draught. Banishment from her presence was too severe a sentence ; he could not bear it and live—he said so.

But she was firm. She who knew the danger so well, whose eyes were not blinded by passion or self-interest, though she had loved him entirely, though her future life promised to be even sadder and lonelier than his own. She could do right, though hers appeared far the harder task of the two. We call them the weaker sex ; we mock their frailties, their indecision, their inconstancy and love of change ; yet I have known women bear suffering both of body and

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mind without wincing, from which a strong man has shrunk and turned away aghast.

"It must not be," she said softly, but decidedly. "This is our last meeting upon earth. It is hard to say farewell. Gilbert, if it will make you happier, I will even pray that you may forget me."

He was angry, maddened, desperate.

"You have never loved me," he exclaimed wildly, "if you can say such things to me now. You are like all other women, and I was an idiot to suppose you different. So long as everything went on smoothly, while there was little to lose and much to gain, so long was I in high favour, and Mrs. Latimer saw nothing to be ashamed of in the conquest of Gilbert Orme; but directly there comes a difficulty, directly she on her side has something to give up, something to undergo, oh! then it is quite another thing, and the poor fool who cannot change his affections as a lady does her dress, must suffer for his infatuation during the rest of his life. Well, I thank you for the lesson, Mrs. Latimer. I am not the first man, I conclude, by a good many, who has had to learn it; though it has not been taught in the kindest manner, I am the less likely to forget it. I shall not fall into the same mistake again, you may be sure. Oh! I am likely to be a wise, and a good, and a happy man hereafter!"

He spoke in strong bitter irony; hurt, angry, and self-torturing. She could not answer him for sobbing, and he went on, now softening at her distress, now lashing himself once more into cruelty.

"If I might but live near you, and see you sometimes; if I might watch over you, Ada, and hear from you, and be sure of your welfare. I would even be satisfied that you should never hold communication with me so long as you were well and happy, on condition that I might come to you and aid you in sickness or distress. But no, no, you shake your head, you deny me even a kind word, a pitying look. False, heartless, ungrateful! you never cared for me, and I will crush and annihilate every feeling I ever had for you as I trample this wretched flower under my foot!"

While he spoke, he took a sprig of geranium from a stand on the table, and ground it with a curse beneath his heel. Then, without another word or look, turned abruptly to the door, and left the apartment.

With fixed eyes and parted lips, Ada stretched out her arms towards his receding figure. She tried to speak, but

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her voice was gone. Like the vague noises of a dream, she heard his footsteps die away upon the stair, the closing of the street door, and the wheels of the cab which had been waiting for him clattering away up the street. Then for the first time she realised her desolation. She felt the agony she had undergone, and knew the extent and the hopelessness of her loss. Never to see him again! neither to-day, nor to-morrow, nor next month, nor through all the weary years they both might live: never to hear his voice, nor see his handwriting, nor know aught of him save through careless indifferent third persons. Her dearest hope to be that he might forget her, that he might belong exclusively to another, and love that fortunate woman as well as he had loved her. No! she could not quite bring herself to that, and yet how selfish to wish it otherwise. And half an hour ago her destiny was in her own power! Had she so willed it, she might have been his own all her life. It was a cruel reflection, and yet had it to be done again, Ada thought she would again have found strength for what she considered the right.

Nevertheless, she picked up the poor flower he had crushed with such brutal harshness, and hid it away sadly and tenderly in her bosom.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE THORN IN THE FLESH



IT is a bright spring afternoon in the first flush of the London season. The old story has begun over again with fresh hopes, fresh schemes, a few fresh faces—the old story of dining and driving and dressing, and pushing on with calm polite energy that never relaxes, as though it had some definite object for its goal. There are indeed a few blanks amongst the rank and file of the *élite*. The pale visitor who knocks at the door of lowly hut and regal palace, alike regardless of the hall-porter's "not at home" and the peasant-mother's imploring cry, has taken care of that. Certain Amphytrions will bow blandly to their guests no more; a joker or two has exchanged his thoughtless existence for something perhaps a little more like real earnest; Timon of Athens has left a hatchment on his four-storeyed house, and his affairs in a state of hopeless confusion; yet the ball goes round much the same. A few words of languid pity comprise Timon's epitaph. "The fool of a doctor never bled him. How well his horses sold at Tattersall's; and who has got his cook?" His very cab-horse stands opposite to them now as they sit in the bay-window of their club; but Landless, Flippant, and the like have already paid tribute to his memory, as recorded above, and are talking of something else.

Charley Wing has succeeded to a fortune. Charley Wing has become the unexpected possessor of docks in Liverpool, and acres in Buckinghamshire, and mines in Cornwall, and money in the funds. No longer a gay *condottiere* living from hand to mouth, looking perpetually over his shoulder for somebody who "wants" him, reduced to his last shifts to obtain credit for his gloves, Charley Wing has become a man

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of substance—a landholder, a capitalist. The change has had its usual effect. From a light-hearted open-handed good-for-nothing, he has become a morose close-fisted curmudgeon. The *ci-devant* dandy walks about now with thick soles and a cotton umbrella. Landless asked him last week to lend him a “pony.”

“Only a pony, I give you my honour,” said that experienced borrower, in a tone of injured feeling, “and he has never spoken to me since, besides refusing point-blank. The infernal screw!”

The pony would have been useful to Landless, who owes money to everybody that will trust him. A year ago, if Charley Wing by rare accident had a five-pound note in his pocket, it was at the service of the first person who asked for it. The evergreen Flippant, settling his neckcloth and feeling the padding of his coat, opines that “it’s all up with a fellow when he gets into more than ten thousand a year,” and his auditors, having applauded Flippant’s remark, as is their custom, the latter struts away with the happy persuasion that he has perpetrated a jest. Holyhead joins the group, and nods to a man in the street, who walks moodily by, with his eyes fixed on the pavement, and who takes no notice of the salute nor of his friends in the window.

“Gad,” says Landless, “there’s a fellow that, according to Flippant, must have come in for a pot of money. It’s all up with Orme since he went to that queer Australian climate. I never saw a man so changed in my life. He was never likely to set the Thames on fire; but still he used to be a cheery, amusing bird enough, and now you can’t get a word out of him, good or bad. You know him, Holyhead, better than anybody—what’s the matter with him? Is it lungs, or liver, or lawsuits, or what?”

“How d’ye mean he can’t set the Thames on fire?” interrupted Holyhead, rising freely, as was his wont, in defence of an absent friend. “There’s not a fellow of our own set’s got better brains than Orme. If he turned his mind to it, I would back him to write a book, hanged if I wouldn’t” (“Nobs” always avowed that he considered the production of a book, good or bad, as the *ne plus ultra* of mental ability). “He’s only seedy after a sea-voyage, that’s all. So would you be Landless, if that great stomach of yours was turned inside out without intermission for twelve or fourteen weeks. He’ll be all right after the Derby. A fellow never feels as if he was thoroughly at home again till he has seen a Derby, you know.”

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Holyhead did not think exactly as he spoke. He, too, had not failed to remark the visible alteration in his friend's looks and manner; had been hurt to observe that his own society, once so welcome, was now shunned as much as possible, and had, indeed, given many an anxious thought to the state of Orme's mind and spirits; but he was too staunch and judicious a friend to make Gilbert's feelings the topic of conversation in a club, and was not sorry, moreover, to pooh-pooh any suggestions of Landless, whom in his heart he considered a gossiping old fool. That worthy, however, had not done with him yet. He laid his cane impressively on Holyhead's shoulder, and lowered his voice to a confidential whisper.

"Something wrong," said he, with a shake of his head. "Depend upon it, my dear fellow, there's a screw loose somewhere. Just like his poor father. I remember him well, though he was rather before my time, you know. He went just in the same way—gave up hunting and society and all that; took to living quite by himself; grew perfectly childish, I've been told; and at last died very suddenly in his arm-chair. They hushed it all up, I remember; but everybody down there was persuaded he had made away with himself. It's in the blood, depend upon it—in the blood. I know what these things are, and I should never be surprised at anything in that family."

"Nonsense," retorted Holyhead, fairly provoked, and in another minute he was galloping off in the direction of the Park, to get rid of his misgivings, if possible, by rapid motion; whilst Landless, taking up the evening paper, fell to its perusal with the calm satisfaction of one who has succeeded in making his neighbour thoroughly uncomfortable.

It required, indeed, no great perception to observe a change in the demeanour of Gilbert Orme; for a few weeks after his return he had disappeared altogether, and even his most intimate friends never knew how or where those weeks of wild, passionate sorrow had been spent. From my own knowledge of his character, I incline to think he remained in London during that dreary period. There are some spirits that find relief from suffering in restlessness, in perpetual motion, and continuous excitement. For these there are strong hopes of recovery. They wear out body and mind with the violence and rapidity of their motions, till nature will be denied no longer, and exhaustion forces on them the anodyne of rest. It is grievous to wake to consciousness once more, and the treatment must in all probability be repeated over

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and over again till it produces its effect. Each fresh paroxysm becomes less painful, each love of oblivion deeper than its predecessor. Wave after wave of self-consuming sorrow succeeds at long intervals, and the troubled ocean subsides into a cold, sad calm at last. Others, again, seem to be stunned and crushed by the blow they have sustained. They gaze wildly around, apparently incapable of an effort for their own preservation. Dull and stupefied, they take no note of anything but the fatality that has overtaken them. Perhaps with touching helplessness they hover aimlessly about the spot where the wreck went to pieces when she came ashore. They would hide themselves and their woes from their fellow-men; they want no sympathy, no assistance; they only ask to be left unnoticed and alone. For such there is little hope. The wild animal carries his wound home to the solitude of his den, but he reaches it only to die.

Those few weeks were a blank in Gilbert's life. It is needless to say how he repented of his bitter words and violent reproaches in his last interview with Ada. How twenty-four hours had not elapsed ere he was willing to submit to anything, however humiliating, only to see her again. How he went back the following day to her house at the earliest hour decency would permit, and found that she was gone.

"Gone out of town," the maid said, "and given up her lodgings, and left no address. She was quite sure there was no address. Mrs. Latimer went away last night."

Every word struck cold as ice to his heart. He went straight to his mother's. In the drawing-room was an open note to Gertrude in Ada's handwriting. The former lady was not yet dressed. It had evidently arrived the evening before, and been thrown carelessly aside after perusal. It contained only a few lines, stating that the writer was "summoned into the country unexpectedly, and should be unable to attend her ladyship any more." He crushed it up in his hand with a curse, and then he pressed it to his lips tenderly and with a ghastly smile. How many fond happy tears in former days had dropped on those delicate characters, and now it seemed a cruel mockery that they should record his sentence. He waited to see no one, but rushed incontinently from the house, and it was several weeks ere Lady Olivia, or Lady Gertrude, or any of them, heard of him again.

Ada had indeed sought safety in flight. Enclosing a few hurried lines to her husband's agents, she informed them of

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her projected departure, and her intention of writing to them again with her new address, which she insisted must be communicated to no one but Mr. Latimer on his arrival. From the uncertainty of his movements, she was spared the trial of having to answer her husband's letter. She was stern and pitiless. With that dogged resolution which sustains women in an effort of self-sacrifice, she stifled all the softer and kindlier feelings of her nature, forcing herself into what she deemed the performance of her duty with the savage energy of despair. And she thought, poor Ada! that she could sustain this high-wrought part—that her own heart would not soon smite her too keenly on his behalf, whom she knew to be in sadness and loneliness and desolation—that the reaction would not come and leave her weaker, fonder, more helpless, more miserable than before. However, she went out of town, and left no trace by which he could follow her or obtain information of her whereabouts; and after a time Gilbert reappeared on that stage on which the characters wear their motley with such appropriate gestures, on which the performers are so well up in their respective parts.

London, particularly in the season, is no place for the indulgence of solitary grief. A man cannot well sulk or mope by himself whose breakfast-table is covered with cards and invitations, whose leisure is continually broken in upon by acquaintances calling themselves friends, and who have a thousand schemes of pleasure and pastime, of which they have elected him a principal partaker. He allows himself to be carried away by the tide, and joins in amusements for which he has no zest from sheer want of energy to make head against the flood. I am not sure but that the pale convive sitting at the board, clad in brave apparel, and crowned with the festive wreath, is not a drearier sight, as he quaffs his wine with ghastly smiles, than the cowering wretch who shrinks from his fellows in honest helplessness, neither afraid to bemoan his sorrow nor ashamed to confess his sufferings. As usual, the braver nature must take the deepest wounds the while it carries the highest crest, and the serge jerkin is opened at once to dress scars that must stiffen uncared for beneath a cloth of gold.

Gilbert could not refuse to acknowledge his acquaintances because he no longer took the slightest interest in them and their doings, nor to dine with his former associates simply because he was himself restless and unhappy. Insensibly he glided into something of his previous life, kept the same hours, frequented the same clubs, cut off his beard, dressed

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like other men of his age, and went through the usual routine of what is termed good society. But the zest was gone from everything he did—there was the bitterness of gall in the cup, quaff it as bravely as he might—a sting in every pleasure rankling and probing to his heart's core. I heard a lad complaining once to a surgeon that he had run a thorn deep into his hand, and whenever he moved, whatever he touched, he was reminded of its presence by the pain. "Cut it out," was the sage and medical advice given. "Oh, doctor," said the boy, "it would hurt more to cut it out than to bear it as it is!" I have often thought of my young friend and his philosophy, not differing entirely from Hamlet's. How many of us have a thorn that we would fain be rid of, and yet that we go on enduring, afraid to face the pain of eradication! How many a burden would be thrown off, how many a chain broken, how many a complaint spared, could we but bring ourselves to contemplate unshrinkingly the possibility of cutting it out! Every day it works deeper and deeper, burrowing through the flesh to incorporate itself with the bone—every day the difficulty of extraction becomes greater—more and more we wince from the probe. At last we resign ourselves helplessly to our pain. Habit is second nature—it becomes part and parcel of ourselves. Perhaps the boy was right, after all, and "it would hurt more to cut it out than to bear it as it is!"

I do not think that at this time Gilbert was an agreeable companion. He took to drinking deeply, not with the jovial *abandon* that glosses over, if it cannot excuse, that vice, but with a morose determination anything but characteristic of a *bon camarade*. After these bouts he would go into society with a flushed brow and haggard eyes to stand in silence contemplating the scene with indifference, or to whisper a few sardonic remarks to his next neighbour, who, if of the fair sex, was pretty sure to approve of his observations. The best and kindest of women are not proof against well-directed satire aimed at their friends. His potations seemed to have no effect upon his demeanour, certainly not to raise his spirits—the latter indeed were observed to sink lower and lower with the waning decanters. Gilbert seldom laughed now; when he did, those who heard his merriment cared little to have it repeated. It was not a healthy ebullition—not the least like a child's mirth. Altogether, he was strangely altered. Some of the ladies thought him improved, but these were chiefly dames who found themselves, to use their own jargon, considerably *blasées*, and who would have greeted Mephistopheles himself in a white neckcloth with the

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utmost cordiality, if he promised to be different from the people they usually met. Mrs. Montpellier was quite concerned about him. She stood for an hour in a corner of the blue drawing-room at Ormolu House talking to Holyhead confidentially of his friend, regardless of the construction charitable observers might put on this long conversation.

"Get him out of London, I entreat you," said she, with kindly sympathy melting in her dark eyes. "Get him to Bath or Brighton, or abroad to drink the waters, or anywhere. I tell you he's killing himself here. Look at him! did you ever see anybody so altered? What are all his friends about? Dear! how I wish I was his mother! I should march him off with me down into the country, and nurse him till he got well. You know what a life he is leading. You men know everything, only you all screen one another. Up all night, and dissipating and gambling, I hear; and, worse than all, losing his health and his looks day by day. And he used to be such a dear, bright, fresh-coloured boy. Now promise me—promise me, Lord Holyhead, that you'll try and do something to save him before it is too late!"

Good-hearted Holyhead strove to calm Mrs. Montpellier's anxieties, assuring her that they were entirely without foundation, that Gilbert's altered looks were but the effect of climate, and that his late hours and extravagances were but bad habits contracted in the colonies, which he would soon lose again now that he had returned to his former associates; but he succeeded neither in reassuring the lady nor himself. Mrs. Montpellier shook her glossy black head, vowing she would face the whole Visigoth set, and attack Lady Olivia herself on behalf of her son, rather than let things go on as they were; whilst Holyhead, who had his own reasons for knowing the truth of these reports about Orme's wild caprices and his late losses at play, determined to expostulate with him forthwith as to the imprudence and folly of the way in which he was going on. He watched his opportunity accordingly, and regardless of entreating glances cast at him from many a shawled beauty and hooded chaperone, who wanted him to call up their carriages, he followed Gilbert down the steps of Ormolu House as the latter emerged with the obvious intention of departing alone and on foot; and, taking his arm *nolens volens*, expressed his determination of walking home with him for a quiet chat. It is no easy matter to commence taking even the most intimate friend to task concerning his habits, demeanour, and general conduct, but Holyhead was not a man to beat about the bush when

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he knew where the game lay; and, lighting a cigar, he plunged at once without hesitation *in medias res*.

"Gilbert," said the peer, emitting the smoke from his mouth in short sharp puffs, as was his custom when peculiarly energetic, "they tell me you are playing the devil. I am the oldest friend you have, you know, and I don't care a straw whether I offend you or not. You're getting into the worst set in London. I haven't seen you at a respectable house till to-night for a week. You've lost no end of money—more than even you can afford—within the last few days; and everybody is talking about your altered manner and strange ways. One by one you're losing every friend you ever had. You must take a pull, old fellow, you must indeed. Hang it! you're not a fool, though you're behaving like one. You can't go on so."

"What do you wish me to do?" said Gilbert, in such a quiet hopeless tone as disappointed his friend sadly. Holyhead had almost wished he would quarrel with him, pull him up for his interference, give him an opportunity of saying a host of sharp things, and of rescuing his friend, so to speak, with the strong hand from himself; but this gentle, unquestioning acquiescence disarmed the peer completely, upset his whole mode of attack, and confused all his operations.

"Do?" repeated he; "why, come with me to Germany, or Switzerland, or Norway, or anywhere you like. Get out of London, and into fresh air and a quiet life. I'll go with you to-morrow, if you'll only say the word, and pitch every engagement I have to the devil. Hang it! old fellow, you're the dearest friend I have, or I wouldn't speak to you as I do."

"You are a kind good fellow," answered Gilbert, and again the utter hopelessness of his tone sank into his friend's heart. "But what is the use?—what is the use?"

He repeated the words vacantly, and, as it seemed, unconsciously. Holyhead was at a nonplus. There was something in all this beyond his simple skill to fathom or to set right. He stopped beneath a gaslight and peered anxiously into his companion's face. There was that in it which he could not rightly understand. Everybody who knew Nobs said that his heart was in the right place. Something like a tear glistened on his shaggy cheek as he grasped his friend's arm once more, and spoke in a softened and broken voice.

"Gilbert, I never had a brother, but I could not have loved fifty brothers as well as I do you. There's something wrong, very wrong, I can see plainly. Trust me. Tell me what it is. I don't care what you've done. I'll stand by you through

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thick and thin. Only trust me. Only tell me what I can do for you."

The other burst out laughing. Orme's temper was so variable now, you never knew whether he would be grave or gay for five minutes together.

"You're quite in the blues to-night, Nobs," said he, with harsh jeering merriment. "What the devil should I have to confess worse than the rest of us? You don't think I've robbed a church, do you? or that, if I had, I should be sorry for it? Cheer up, old fellow! every man for himself, you know. When I want you, I'll come to you. Don't be offended; you mean well, I'm sure, but you don't make allowances for a fellow like me—a fellow that cares for nobody, and has nobody to care for him. It's a jolly life—*very*. You can't think how happy I am sometimes. Here we are at my door. Will you come in and drink brandy, or go quietly home to bed? You won't? Well, then, I must take your allowance and my own too. There's nothing like it. *Il segreto per esser felice*, you know." And he trolled out the famous drinking-song from *Lucretia Borgia* in rich manly tones, scarcely yet impaired by his failing health.

Holyhead bade him good-night with a sad wistful countenance, and betook himself to his own bachelor home at a far slower pace than ordinary, shaking his head moodily at intervals as he strode along the streets. The peer was at his wits' end—not a long distance, certainly—yet had he never arrived so obviously at that terminus before. As he drew his latchkey from his pocket, he startled the policeman on duty by the energy with which he gave vent to this remarkable expression—

"*Pounded*, by Jupiter! There must be a woman at the bottom of it!"

And Gilbert drank brandy as he had threatened; ay, and a darker fluid than brandy, poured drop by drop from a phial—a fluid without which he could now never know a moment's composure or repose; and then he sallied forth again, with many a bitter laugh at his own weakness, and crossed the Edgware Road, and flitted to and fro about a certain dreary street, as they say the miser's ghost flits aimlessly about the spot which concealed his buried treasure long ago.

CHAPTER XXXV

A FELLOW FEELING

THE only person in whom Gilbert seemed to confide, or in whose society at this period he seemed to take the slightest pleasure, was his cousin, Lady Gertrude. There might have been some secret sympathy between these two; for Gertrude also, with no obvious cause for uneasiness, was not happy. It may appear strange that a young lady possessed of her advantages, both of person and position, rejoicing, moreover, in a good constitution and a fortune of thirty thousand pounds, should have a care or an annoyance beyond the folds of her dress and the circumference of her crinoline; but pleasures and sorrows are pretty equally distributed amongst all classes in this world of ours, and the peer's daughter is no more free from the latter than the peasant lass is debarred from the former of these necessities of existence. When the princess meets the milkmaid, in the fairy tale, and makes the latter the *confidante* of her woes, do we not find that her little world of hopes and fears and jealousies and anxieties is very like that of her low-born companion? Nay, that Dolly's very often is the most enviable lot of the two? Though she have to rise at daybreak, and milk the cows on a misty morning, though she break her fast on brown bread, and wear a coarse but not unbecoming petticoat, she enjoys several advantages that are not commanded by her noble friend in brocade. Dolly can come and go unquestioned, if not unnoticed, to and from her tryst beneath the hawthorn tree. Dolly's gambols at fair and market are, if not uncensured, at least unchallenged by her gossiping comrades. Free-handed Dolly can box her swain's ears for attempting a kiss, or offer her red lips to that smacking salute without fear of discovery; and may jig it all Saturday night at a merry-making with Hodge if she will, and find her freedom unimpaired by her activity on Sunday morning. But precious Perdita must do none of these things. Perdita must not go across the threshold of the palace unattended. Perdita must

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by no means overheat her pretty self with exercise, or wet her tiny feet in the morning dew. Above all things, Perdita must be careful of every look or sign she casts amongst the household, more particularly that portion of it which wears doublet and hose. Perdita may dance a minuet with the Grand Falconer, a venerable nobleman, feathered and hooded and beaked like one of his own hawks; but she must not so much as speak to the handsome equerries, or look at the roguish pages; and as for that beautiful young prince to whom she has been betrothed unseen, and with whose portrait she has fallen in love, etiquette forbids poor Perdita to mention his name, or inquire about his movements, or even to seem aware of the happiness for which she is destined. Despite of the brocade and the confectionery, the gilded chambers and royal coaches, the silks and satins, and diamond earrings and glass slippers, I cannot but think that I would rather be Dolly the milkmaid than Perdita the princess.

Now, although no young person in London succeeded in getting her own way more effectually than did Lady Gertrude, there was, so to speak, a rose-leaf crumpled amongst all her mattresses, which for the present destroyed her comfort and disturbed her repose. It is perhaps in my reader's remembrance, that on a certain occasion during the previous year a sufficiently cavalier farewell was taken of an old friend in Portland Place, bound for a longer voyage than is usual with the denizens of that locality; but I cannot expect my reader to be intuitively aware how that careless greeting afterwards rankled in the minds of the two individuals concerned. Above all, how the lady brooded over it month after month with ever-increasing remorse; how she would have given anything she possessed to recall it; how she had resolved to make amends for it, and do away with the recollection of it on the first opportunity; and how, when the opportunity arrived, and John Gordon, swarthier, squarer, and sterner than ever, made his reappearance in Belgrave Square, Lady Gertrude, much to her dismay, found the tables completely turned, and herself in the unpleasant position of one who was virtually asking forgiveness for an offence which had either never been perceived, or was now completely forgotten. I recollect a sardonic old trainer at Newmarket who, when his wife disputed with him, never vouchsafed her a reply, not from any amiable motive of concession, but with the persuasion that such a course of treatment was the greatest punishment he could inflict. "Women," said the ancient misogynist, with a grin, "women hate a *walk over!*" And indeed nothing can

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be so disappointing to those gentle beings as to discover that they have brought up all their artillery against an object which melts into air the moment they have pointed their guns. It must be aggravating to find ready submission where one has expected resistance worthy of one's steel, stolid indifference where one anticipated entreaties and reproaches and complaints, obedience to those cruel commands it was never one's real wish to see enforced. I think if I was a woman, under such circumstances I should sit down and cry. I believe they sometimes do.

John Gordon, when he returned to England, had paid an early visit, as in duty bound, to Belgrave Square. Even Lady Olivia was glad to see his dark, honest face again, and greeted him with a cordiality foreign to her customary deportment. Gertrude, on the other hand, for the first time in her life, felt troubled and uneasy, whiter than was becoming, whilst he followed the servant who announced him through the ante-room, and redder than was convenient when she gave him her hand and welcomed him home. There was no lingering pressure in his grasp, no change of voice nor colour nor bearing, while he returned her greeting; neither indecision nor uncertainty in the bright inscrutable eyes. If ever John Gordon looked like a man of iron, it was at that moment; and yet it was a moment he had anticipated and dwelt upon during many an hour of toil on land and wearisome monotony at sea. He meant that it should be his last look upon his imaginary Eden, his last gasp of the scented air from those gardens which must bloom for him no more.

John was a straightforward and determined man. With the fall of his worldly prospects, he was content to accept its inevitable accompaniment, the destruction of his castle in the air, with its moat and postern, its pinnacles and battlements, its bower of beauty and its stately keep, even of the tender flower that clung about its wall. What matter to us the strong man's dreams, all the fairer, perhaps, and gentler because of the stern moulding of his nature? What matter the future he could imagine so vividly with a woman's tenderness and a child's trust? or the abiding affection, deep and pure and strong as his own honest heart? or the iron links that only such men can rivet, that only such men can break? He had strength to sweep them all away, like so many fibres of gossamer before the cold north wind. He had strength to accept his task as it was offered him, and to do right for right's sake.

So when her aunt departed to her own den, as was her

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custom, and left the two young people alone in the back drawing-room, John took up his hat incontinently to go too. Lady Gertrude, quaking in her chair for what was to come next, did not sufficiently appreciate the relief she ought to have derived from this movement. In good truth, her first feeling was one of disappointment, succeeded by a keen sense of anger and a strong inclination to cry. But she resolved that she had some reparation to make for that heartless speech over which she had been brooding for so many months. She clung to the excuse that she was herself in the wrong, that he had a perfect right to expect some amends, some explanation. The difficulty was how to set about it.

"You—you must have found it very hot in Australia," was the young lady's insidious method of postponing the dreaded moment, and commencing the conversation.

"Very," answered John absently, looking down the while, and thinking what a pretty little foot it was that peeped so coyly from beneath the folds of that primrose-coloured morning-dress.

"Are you not very glad to come home?" asked the fair diplomatist; a leading question, you may observe, and likely to produce remarks of a personal nature. There was an unusual softness in Lady Gertrude's voice, a timidity and hesitation in her manner that attracted John Gordon's attention to her face; the dark eyes shone with a mild lustre, and the colour came and went under the clear, delicate skin.

"I went away because I was obliged," answered he sturdily; "I came back for the same reason. We men of business, you know, Lady Gertrude, have no such fancies as likes and dislikes."

She looked hurt and disappointed; she paused for a moment, and, though her voice shook a little, she tried again—

"I thought I should have seen you to wish you good-bye. I had no idea you would really sail on such short notice. Gilbert told us a great deal about you in his letters; we were always so glad to hear. Mr. Gordon, you must have thought me very unkind the last time we met; I did not mean to be so. Indeed, I am rejoiced to see you back again."

There was a moisture in the shining eyes as she gave him her hand, with a pretty little imploring gesture, very winning in one usually so haughty and composed. John had need of all his resolution, all his firmness, not to raise it to his lips, to steal his arm round her, and take her once for all to his heart. But he was determined, uncompromising, and with certain old-fashioned ideas of honour and probity in his dealings with

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the weaker sex, now very generally exploded ; so he held the little hand reverently and somewhat sorrowfully in his own.

“ Believe me, Lady Gertrude,” said he, “ I have too few friends to lose one by taking offence where it is not meant ; I am proud to be numbered amongst yours. I hope, however seldom we may meet in future, you will always consider me one of the truest and sincerest you have.”

With that he relinquished the hand, not daring to trust himself any longer in that too attractive society, and abstaining from another glance at Gertrude’s tearful face, hurried out of the room and was gone.

They seldom met after this. John Gordon, putting his shoulder practically to the wheel, went less and less into society ; and Lady Gertrude, attending, as is the wont of fashionable young ladies, party after party all the week through, thought it must be the sameness of her amusements that so palled upon her fancy, and the intense stupidity of her friends that made those wearisome festivities so dull. Had you hinted to her that it was an irritating process, and of a saddening tendency, to scan those same crowds for one stern dark face, night after night in vain, and that the failure of the search might fairly account for the disgust and *ennui* of the seeker, who would have denied the accusation so indignantly as Lady Gertrude ?

Perhaps some unacknowledged harmony of feeling between the two may have made her at this epoch extremely tolerant of her cousin’s society, extremely forbearing to his whims ; for Gilbert was no longer the merry acceptable guest, whose entrance into a room was like the taking down of a shutter, letting in a flood of enlivening light. On the contrary, his gloomy though impatient glance more resembled some resinous torch, which cast a lurid glare on every surrounding object, now flaring into fantastic flames, now smouldering down to a deep red glow, suggestive of burning pain and condensed fury, ready at any moment to burst forth.

It soothed him, though, to be with Gertrude. All the old cousinly confidences began to return. — Twice or three times a week Gilbert was sure to find himself in Belgrave Square ; and Gertrude, with womanly tact and tenderness, was satisfied to mitigate and distract his sorrows without inquiring too closely into their origin. She too felt she was doing good—the only balm for a wounded spirit, the only possible chance by which those who are injured in their tenderest affections can hope to divert their minds from their own selfish griefs—selfish, indeed, and morbid and imaginary, yet none the less

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painful for that. These fancied woes are sometimes harder to bear than the real tangible trials of life. It is only the old and worn-out—those who have outlived their hopes and fears—who are capable of analysing the sensations of the heart, long since dead within their breasts. Will they not agree with me, that most of the pleasures and the pains of that life which once seemed to them so important were purely and essentially imaginary? Why did your tears flow fresh and fast in a foreign clime, when they sent you a withered flower that had bloomed on your mother's grave? Why did your heart leap and thrill for joy when you read that the brother whom you have not seen since he left school, whom you would not know if you met him to-morrow a grown man, big and bearded and bronzed by an Indian sun, had won the Victoria Cross with which our Queen rewards the bravest of the brave? Was it a corporeal and substantial annoyance that spoiled your dinner and kept you awake half the night because you were told Mrs. Verjuice had declared your wit to be buffoonery, and your genius an imposition, and your character a humbug?—or can you account upon any rational and material principles for the delight which you experienced when Fanny gave you a flower out of her bouquet at supper, and vowed you were the best waltzer in the room? You never entertained serious designs upon that affable young lady; soft as you were, you were never soft enough to be taken in by flirting Fanny's ways, and yet you were more pleased with the compliment and the rosebud than if anyone had given you a hundred pounds. Yes, we may soon lose ourselves in the definitions of the real and ideal—where does the one end and the other begin? Hunger and thirst and fatigue are scarcely more physical sensations than love and hate and fear. A knock on the head does not stun you more effectually than the tidings of a great sorrow. Anxiety, disappointment, and wounded affection will deface the physical man far more than fevers and such bodily ailments; the frame that hardship and climate have not wasted will droop and dwindle under the gnawing influence of discontent; and even on the outward brow care ploughs her furrows deeper far than pain.

Lady Gertrude's bright eyes and buoyant step were losing day by day something of brilliancy and vigour, whilst her cousin looked ten years older than he had looked a twelve-month ago. People said it was all owing to that odious Australian climate. But whatever might have been the power of fancy in poisoning the happiness of the denizens of Belgrave Square, those of Verbena Villa had to contend with

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a real and actual foe, whose advances would admit of no compromise and no half measures. Despite of the alderman's wilful blindness, despite of Bella's schemes of retrenchment, despite even of John Gordon's honest intelligence and unceasing exertions, the crash had come at last. With the rest of the alderman's personalty Verbena Villa must go to the hammer; and to the hammer accordingly went "that desirable residence," with its furniture and fixtures, its grand pianoforte, its double coach-house, and all its appurtenances and belongings.

It was a sad break-up and blow to the old alderman, but Bella bore it bravely as a heroine, and busied herself in making the lodgings to which they removed at Brighton as comfortable as circumstances would permit. She redoubled her care and tenderness to her father; she encouraged him to talk to her of his ventures and his losses with the tact and perception of true affection. She saw that this was the only method by which she could prevent him from continually brooding over his misfortunes. A sudden fall in the funds consequent upon a panic had completed that ruin of which the American and Australian losses had been the fore-runners; and although John Gordon, whose own speculations were conducted with more foresight than those of his elder partner, remained an independent though an impoverished man, the alderman was obliged to make over his whole personal property to liquidate his liabilities, and take refuge from absolute starvation in a small settlement which had been provided long ago for his only daughter.

It was sad to see the hospitable Villa dismantled and put up for sale; irritating to behold carpets hanging out at window, and mirrors with great spots of whitewash in their centres, and dirty men walking about, examining, appraising, and making themselves completely at home. It was aggravating to see the hospitable owner's choice wines offered for sale and bought up, though at inordinate prices, by Stirling Brothers, who never gave dinner-parties, and old Plumber, who drank nothing but weak-brandy-and-water. Above all, it was conducive to wrath and suggestive of profane swearing to watch heavy boots trampling the borders of Bella's neat flower-garden, and grimy hands pulling the wire-fencing about to test its substance before bidding for it at so much per foot. To one spectator who had arrived early and on horse-back these offences against good manners appeared particularly displeasing. Several lots were, however, knocked down to this energetic cavalier. The portrait of the late Mrs. Jones,

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which excited but little competition, was purchased by him for a sum by no means complimentary to the artist who painted that work or the charms of the lady it represented ; but on the other hand, a cottage pianoforte which stood in the *boudoir* fell to him after a brisk contest at the somewhat unreasonable price of fifty-five guineas. It soon became apparent, however, that this purchaser was determined to possess himself of any article for which he had once made an offer, and this fact ascertained, he was permitted to secure sundry trifles at not much more than twice their real value. The only exception to this forbearance was in the case of the parrot, for which desirable bird an old lady from St. John's Wood betrayed so morbid a longing as nothing but her antagonist's complete indifference to price was able to overcome. When the cage and its living contents were eventually knocked down to his lordship for seventeen guineas, the disappointed one suffered herself to be led away in a flood of tears.

An unusual spectacle might have been, and indeed was remarked in the vicinity of the Regent's Park, after the sale was concluded. Judging from their gestures, it afforded intense gratification to that observant class, the London urchins, and consisted indeed of a mounted gallant proceeding at a hand-gallop in the direction of Baker Street, with a huge gilt cage containing a grey parrot swinging on his arm.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE FEVER SLEEP

I T was about this time I returned to London. I had not been twenty-four hours in town before I sought tidings of my boy. I shall not soon forget the dismay with which I received intelligence that he was lying dangerously ill of a brain fever. I did not think any earthly communication could have made me so sick at heart again. Years ago, when every sunrise brought its fresh glad hopes, and every night its holy trustful calm, when the golden-green was still on the summer leaves, and ere the fragrance and the bloom had departed for ever from the flower, the sting of disappointment was in proportion to the exulting thrill of hope. It was but fair then that a great sorrow should prostrate us in the dust, as a great joy lifted us high above the clouds into the dazzling heaven. But now, when we have retired from the contest, when we have heart no more to don our mail and plate, and leap into the saddle at the first trumpet-sound—when that last wound that sent us reeling out of the press a maimed disabled man for evermore, reminds us, as it reopens and bleeds afresh, how we are crushed and useless henceforth, we feel that we ought at least to have earned immunity from further pain—that if we rode into the *mêlée* again we should find the knights of to-day do not strike so hard or push so fiercely as those grim champions with whom we held our own long ago; that even if the angry steel were to penetrate our defences, it would not bite so deep, nor leave so keen a smart as heretofore; nay, that if we have gained nothing else in our defeat, it has at least made it impossible that we should ever feel so bruised and sore again.

I did not think, I say, that any earthly tidings could have affected me as did this intelligence of Gilbert's dangerous illness. From his friends I learned but with difficulty the apparent cause of his malady. Continual dissipation, obviously without the slightest enjoyment, violent exercise, taken with the sole object of exhausting the frame to the

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utmost, deep drinking at all hours, alone or in company, equally divested of all ideas of merriment and good fellowship, with the frequent use of laudanum to steady the shaking hand and close the sleepless eye, would have shattered a stronger frame and broken a healthier constitution than was ever possessed by any of the Ormes ; and I think a description of one of Gilbert's days, as I gathered it in conversation with Holyhead and others of his intimate friends, would at once account for the state in which I found him on my arrival in London. He was an early riser, they said, though at this time, as long as he could persuade anyone to sit up with him, nothing would induce him to go to bed, and was riding or walking at a rapid pace about the parks long ere any of his companions were astir. From his morning excursions he would come in heated and excited to write a few necessary letters, and smoke, generally without touching food. Towards the middle of the day he would have recourse to stimulants, and then play tennis, rackets, fence, or otherwise employ himself, for hours, in violent exertion, always with the same wild restless manner which was becoming habitual to him. Later in the day he would be again on horseback, sometimes joining his friends in the Park, but oftener riding moody and solitary round the outskirts of London. Afterwards dinners, to which the most reckless and good-for-nothing of his associates were invited, were succeeded by frantic orgies, in which noise and ribaldry and excess reigned paramount. Perhaps he alone who was their chief promoter resisted the degrading tendency of these *réunions*. Certainly for him the cup never held a Lethean draught ; and he would on occasion rise from a table at which all the others were more or less intoxicated, and go into society with a steady step and reserved unfaltering eye. More often nights of deep play succeeded these evenings of debauchery ; and continued losses, of which he seemed utterly careless, were already making rapid inroads on the fine fortune of the heir of West Acres. But one redeeming point, and one only, was remarkable in these unbridled excesses. The other sex were rigidly excluded. Even in good society, Gilbert at this period avoided as much as possible the fairer portion of the assemblage, wincing, as it seemed, from some painful association connected with those that were softest and brightest and most lovable. But he shuddered at the bare mention of a woman's actual degradation, and though Clitus had been sure of a welcome to the feast for the very extravagance of his potations, Phryne must have unveiled her ivory charms elsewhere.

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Soon, when Orme's name was mentioned, people began to nod and whisper and shrug their shoulders. Although guiltless of being drunk with wine, the vacant stare betrayed at times that he was stupefied with laudanum. His absent restless manners, his unusual hours and strange variable conduct, now moody and morose, and anon breaking forth into frantic bursts of gaiety, denoted a state of mind little removed from insanity, and ere long it began to be hinted that Orme was mad. "Very queer," people said, touching their foreheads, and smiling quietly, as though there were something irresistibly ludicrous in the subversion of a human intellect. "Gets it from his father. Was in confinement months before he died. Take five to two, this one is shut up in a fortnight." Holyhead used to get very angry, but he, too, could not help feeling alarmed about his friend. At last the blow fell—the blow that everybody but the sufferer had been daily expecting. At a large dinner-party of boon-companions, Gilbert was attacked by brain fever, and carried from the table in an access of delirium.

The world, as we know, invariably adopts the least charitable conclusion. Years before, it had voted the father mad, because he dropped out of its circle, and shut himself up in a country-house; now it was quite willing to be satisfied without inquiry of the insanity of the son. There is something to me inexpressibly painful in the levity with which this dispensation of Providence, and that other awful judgment, suicide, are discussed amongst mankind. Who can calculate the horrors that haunt the wavering mind, the doubts and fancies that distract the quivering nerves, ere the twilight closes in utter darkness, and the morbid imaginative temperament settles into confirmed madness? Who can tell the agony that must be endured, the bitter consciousness of complete desolation, the despairing glances here and there for a gleam of hope or a chance of escape, before the sufferer takes his fatal plunge, in the conviction that any lot must be preferable to that which he can endure no longer? And yet while men pity the loss of worldly fortune, or the maiming of a limb, or the failure of a cherished scheme, they can deem the maniac an object rather of contempt than commiseration, and console themselves with the suggestion of temporary insanity as a cloak for the sufferings and the despair of the suicide. And oh! to think that a grain of timely aid, that a single loving word, might have saved both one and the other. Truly there is many a man who walks about erect with no mark of Cain upon his forehead, against whom, as earnestly

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as against the first murderer, "the voice of a brother's blood crieth from the ground."

Gilbert lay prostrate and insensible in his luxurious apartments, so out of keeping with thoughts of death or sickness. Indeed, he had no lack of friends now at his need. Many a smart carriage stopped at the door, many a dandy associate hoped good-humouredly that "Gilbert would pull through, after all"; many a soft voice lisped its tender inquiries after Mr. Orme. Though they forgot him five minutes afterwards, yet for the moment they were really interested in his welfare. He who expects more from his friends is likely to be disappointed. Better than this, Lady Gertrude, giving up all engagements and amusements, braving, moreover, the remarks and innuendoes of her acquaintances, devoted herself unremittingly to the sick-chamber. Coming early and staying late, she missed no opportunity of being useful to the sufferer, while the subdued energy and quiet force of her character made her an invaluable nurse. Holyhead also took his share of attendance on his friend, and John Gordon, though he did not press his assistance when he found it was not required, made it understood that he was always ready if wanted. I, too, petitioned earnestly to take my turn with the others. They had not the cruelty to refuse me. There were but few left on earth to whom my heart still clung. I felt kindly and charitably towards my fellow-creatures, as who does not that has known great sorrow? But there were scarcely one or two whose voices could still gladden me ever such a little, and one of those voices was my boy's. If it should be mute for ever! Woe is me! the last green leaf of all must wither from the branch.

It was sad to hear it now; sad to endeavour to hush it in the loud ravings of delirium; sadder still to mark the low hoarse whisper that tells so piteously of physical exhaustion. And it was sad, too, to see the gaunt wasted frame, at which fever had been draining like a vampire for hours; the thin shadowy hands, once so capable and strong—the hands that could wield the heaviest club and stop the swiftest ball and hold the hardest pulling horse—alas! feeble as an infant's now; the wan sunken features, so sharp, yet so beautiful still; above all, those deep cavernous eyes, that rolled and shone with the lurid light of madness, and seemed to glare upon a thousand things at once; how deep and bright and awfully beautiful they were, as he lay there in the calm summer afternoons, and told of his spirit's wanderings with a power and eloquence that his weakness seemed to borrow

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from disease. How the glorious and the grotesque mingled themselves in his ravings, as the fever wings bore him away over land and sea to the strange realms of fancy, which none have visited without a vague consciousness that in some stage of existence they have been there before. How the beautiful fictions of antiquity, the gods and goddesses and nymphs of heathen mythology, were encircled and confused with fairies and kelpies and pixies, and all the store of Gothic superstitions of which I should have thought he could scarcely have heard! What torrents of long-neglected lore would burst forth, wherein I recognised, how painfully, the aptitude of the willing pupil whom I had cherished from a child! How link after link of the mind's, mysterious chain led him on as the thread guided the hero through the labyrinth of old into that other world of which, in our ignorance, we know nothing, save that it is populous and unfathomable and illimitable. One hot afternoon I was left alone with the patient; a faint breeze laden with perfume from the mignonette in the open windows stole into the chamber, and the distant roll of carriages in the streets smote monotonously on my ear. He had been quiet for some hours, and I began to hope that the sleep to which we all looked as the last chance of his recovery had come at last. I did not dare to move, lest I should disturb his repose; and as his face was turned to the wall, I could not ascertain whether he was really asleep or not. Worn out with anxiety and fatigue, I was getting drowsy myself, when a sudden movement in the bed made me turn round with a start to watch my charge. He was sitting upright, his hands clasped and his eyes fixed on vacancy with that expression which the fever-nurse knows so well.

"How cold it is! how cold!" he muttered, with a shiver that made my own flesh creep. "The blood was up to my knees, but I have forded the river at last—forded the river and crossed the moor, though the whins pricked me to the bare bone. Ah, true Thomas! there was no fairy queen to lead me. Alone, all alone! Ah! better so; my foot will be the steadier on the bridge. How narrow it is! and must I cross that hissing bar of iron? cross it barefoot, too? Have I never done a good turn in my life? I who never harmed a human being wilfully. And they all forsake me now. Curs and cowards! I would not take a hand of yours to save me from the eternal flames boiling and wreathing down below there, a thousand fathoms deep. I might have had a friend who would not have failed me at the last! Too late now, too late; they are reading the Great Book with

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its flashing pages far away yonder on the golden sands that I shall never reach, and the grave white angel shuts it up and shakes his head. I fear not, I care not. In the face of earth and heaven, all alone—I can cross it all alone. Here goes! Hurrah! I shall reach it yet! Ada! will you not come with me? Ada! my own, my beautiful, my best beloved! it is not heaven if you are left. See! I turn back for you. Look at me—only one look. You used not to be so unkind! Speak to me, dear one. It is her voice; she is mine still, mine for ever. I am saved now, saved and happy; so happy; nothing can hurt me now.”

The last words came very weak, and in broken inarticulate syllables; and they were still dying on his lips as he sank back, apparently insensible. Much alarmed, I summoned his servant, to despatch him at once for the doctor. In my preoccupation I had not remarked a feeble ring at the door-bell, and a whispered conference with that domestic in the passage. The man, I observed, was white and trembling, even before I told him what was the matter.

“Speak to the lady, sir,” he said, “for the love of heaven. The nurse is up already; she can stay with master, whilst I run for the doctor. I shan’t be five minutes.”

And so, without further explanation, he pointed to the door of a dining-room on the ground-floor and was gone.

Leaving Gilbert in a kind of stupor under the nurse’s charge, and promising myself not to be away more than a few minutes, I entered the room indicated, and there found a lady seated near the window, in a state of the deepest distress and agitation. As she strove to rise, and sank back helpless in her chair, and strove to speak, but only gasped inarticulately with white lips and vacant eyes, I had some difficulty in recognising the face I had known and loved from a child, the once blooming and beautiful Ada Latimer. Yes, I had loved that face for years, partly for its own sweet sake, more for its resemblance to one I shall never see again on earth—perhaps, God help me, that I shall not be permitted to meet in heaven. Strange that she should remind me of the lost one more than ever now! Poor Ada! she could not speak, but she grasped my hand, and looked in my face with an eager wistful expression that made my heart bleed. I know not what I said. I scarcely knew why she was there. I made her understand that at least all was not yet over; that the chamber of wasting and dangerous sickness above was not yet the chamber of death. She leaned her head upon her hands, and burst into a passion of weeping that seemed

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to do her good. After a while she looked up and smiled—such a piteous sad smile!—as she pressed my hand once more.

“Thank God,” she said; “I feared the worst, or I should hardly have been here. And yet,” she added abstractedly, and as if unconscious of my presence, “I could not let him die all uncared for and alone. I who have been so cruel to him, so brutal, so ungrateful. I who have been his bane, his blight, his curse. Whom he chose from a thousand fairer and better and nobler than I am, and who gave him up at the first cold breath. And yet, what could I do? what ought I to have done? God help me! what shall I do now?”

Again she bowed her head upon her hands, and after a short interval looked up, more soothed and more composed.

“I was far away in the country,” she said, meeting my eye quite frankly and openly, but not without a faint blush on her gentle brow; “and I saw in the papers that Mr. Orme was dangerously ill. I came up immediately; I knew where he lived; do not ask me how or why; and—and—they had pity on my misery and let me into the house. Tell me the truth—is he better? Do not be afraid. For the love of God tell me true—is there *any* hope?”

Any hope! What a despairing question! How often asked with blanched faces and wild imploring eyes, when the silver cord is frayed to the last fibre! How difficult to answer! How sad for the grave kind doctor, on whose words the poor inquirer hangs as if he had the dispensation of life and death! How hard to tell the truth! How cruel to raise hopes that shall crush the heart they shelter in their ruins! Any hope! I could not tell Ada there was none. I said—

“He still lives; a change has come on within the last half-hour. It may be for the better.”

Oh the bright gleam that swept over her face for an instant like a glory, as she raised her thankful eyes to heaven! A moment afterwards they filled with tears as she took my hand in both of hers, and urged me in imploring accents to install her as his nurse.

“I will be so quiet,” she said, “so careful. He will never know it. Directly he is out of danger I will go away. Oh, do let me, I entreat you! I will do everything on earth they tell me.”

I urged on her the necessity of keeping him quiet, the danger of the slightest agitation, and the general impossibility of such a proceeding. Also, as I was myself getting anxious

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about his state, I begged her to remain where she was for a few minutes, whilst I went upstairs to gather fresh tidings. She sat down, and waited patiently till I came back.

The crisis had indeed passed, and he was asleep—that sleep which the doctor said would save him if it came within a certain period. He was breathing heavily, and, best sign of all, a beaded moisture was standing on his wan forehead. The good nurse pointed to him with a satisfied look.

“No need of the doctor now,” she whispered, “and he can’t be here for an hour yet anyways. It’s this blessed sleep as has saved him. Praised be the Lord.”

So it was. A load seemed taken from my heart, and, though I could scarce tell why, I felt that he was rescued. I flew downstairs to Mrs. Latimer, and told her of the change that had taken place. It was not then, it was not till long afterwards, when I had leisure to think over the events of that anxious time, I became aware that his delirium was at its crisis precisely when she came into the house. I believe in my own mind that his senses, preternaturally sharpened, caught the tones of her low whisper in the hall. I believe that even on the confines of life and death his spirit turned back, true and unchanged, to the sound of the dear voice. I believe that even at the supreme moment her image filled the fever-maddened brain, and her influence soothed down the paroxysm and hushed it off to the slumber which saved his life.

Poor Ada! She bowed her head down till her cold forehead touched my hands, as she clasped them fervently in both her own. Then she looked up so beseechingly, so tearfully.

“May I not see him?” she said. “Only for one instant—only one look, and never—*never* again,” she added, with a mournful earnestness that I was not meant to hear.

He must have had a harder heart than mine who could have resisted those pleading eyes. I took her hand and led her to the door of Gilbert’s chamber, entering softly on tiptoe and with bated breath lest we should wake the patient. He was lying perfectly relaxed and helpless, sunk in that profound sleep which is only produced by utter debility. I drew the nurse to the window, for I thought indeed no mortal eye should look on that loving woman in her great agony. Have I lived, like many another, to forego the dearest hopes I cherished here on earth, and shall I not feel for those from whom the daylight hath departed for evermore—for whom henceforth the rush of streams and the song of birds and the

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laughter of children are no longer a carol from the heavens, but a requiem for the dead? I could not succour nor comfort her. I heard the stifled sob, the low moan painfully repressed, and I held my breath and turned my eyes doggedly away.

The rustle of her dress made me look up once more. She was leaving the room without a thought of anyone in it but him to whom she had bid her silent farewell. At the door she turned, and, stooping down, pressed her lips against the threshold, and so with that last kiss of humble hopeless homage dropped her veil and walked soberly and sadly away. My poor Ada! that proud but loving heart must have been nearly breaking then.

CHAPTER XXXVII

A COLD DINNER

MR. GORDON is making his way in a hansom cab through the many difficulties and impediments that infest the journey from any part of the metropolis to London Bridge station. Enterprising cabmen have indeed discovered, so to speak, a north-west passage on the Surrey side, which while they make their charge for a considerable *détour*, they affirm to be the more expeditious, although the longer route. But impatient travellers, doubtful of "catching the train," will agree with me that the narrow and winding streets of this insidious approach are almost as unfavourable to punctuality as the constant stoppages of the more direct thoroughfare. Be this as it may, John Gordon's brows are sterner, and his manner more uncompromising than usual, as he directs his driver to make all the haste he can to save the five o'clock train.

A decided man in a state of indecision is always an amusing sight. He invariably assumes for the occasion an air of preternatural determination, as though to mask with extra resolution of front the wavering of his main body, and so to bully himself and others into the belief that he is not to be induced to depart one inch from his usual course. All the time he is conscious of feeling painfully ridiculous. Mr. Gordon is at this juncture suffering acutely from the sensations I have described. The cabman who drives him thinks he never met "a gent" with whom he would be so unwilling to adopt his favourite plan of "trying it on": in other words, who would be so unlikely to submit to imposition. If the cabman only knew, he might to-day for the only day in the year grossly overcharge him with impunity. John is not habitually the least of a sophist, but he is trying even now to persuade himself that it is his duty to run down to Brighton and see Gilbert, that he has no other object in view than a visit to his old friend, and that he does not care the least whether or not he is late for the train; all which

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are egregious fallacies, and the man within the man knows them to be such.

He is *not* late for the train, however, and during the fifty minutes that he is whirling along at the rate of a mile for every minute, we may take a peep at the family party to which he is about to pay his hurried visit. Perhaps we shall not be altogether persuaded of his assumed carelessness as to whether he goes or stays.

Extended on a sofa in a bay-window jutting into the street, commanding a view of "down channel" and the ominous clouds that always gather towards evening over Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight, lies Gilbert Orme, wan, weakened, and attenuated, yet drinking in with every breath new life from the reviving westerly breeze. His attitude and appearance are of themselves sufficiently picturesque to attract the notice of the passers-by without the aid of Lady Gertrude's graceful form, who is bending over his couch and ministering to him as only woman can minister to the wants of an invalid. At Brighton our English reserve unaccountably merges into the opposite extreme. The houses are so constructed that the denizens of the ground-floors live to all intents and purposes in the street, and we are satisfied, as the most southern of foreigners could be, with the publicity. So everybody that passes can see the cousins; and for seclusion they might as well be in Pall Mall.

Gertrude has been reading to him. One of his favourite books now—speculative, melancholy, and mysterious; such a book as you would choose to read in the grey autumn afternoon, when the wind is roving in gusts and the dry leaves are pattering down by scores and whirling about on the russet earth. It has lost nothing of its melancholy or its interest in the tones of that full young voice, and the reader's lips have not forborne to quiver ever and anon, as though the words she uttered stirred some deep chord of feeling at her heart. She has shut it now, and is looking wistfully at Gilbert, who tosses wearily upon his sofa.

"It is a fallacy," she says, "Gilbert, from beginning to end, and yet the writer knows human nature so well that he attacks us in our weakest place, and makes us for the moment agree with him and believe in his philosophy."

"A fallacy!" he replies, with a harsh weak laugh; "so is everything. Show me a code that people abide by—a faith that they do not virtually deny every day—and then you may call this a fallacy more than the rest. This man only does not pretend to ignore what we really are. He argues from

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our conscious weakness and our continual aspirations after strength that we are in a state of transition. He says very justly that suffering is the normal condition of helplessness, and that we are not compelled to accept that condition. I believe him. I believe our fate is in our own hands."

"Oh, Gilbert!" she remonstrates, "have you ever been really unhappy? Have you ever felt that everything on earth had deserted you—that there was nothing left to cling to, and you were far too weak to stand alone? Then you must have been convinced that man, without some extraneous aid, is utterly and essentially helpless."

He smiles bitterly at the first part of her sentence; but as she proceeds he seems to analyse his past feelings and weigh their testimony for and against her inference. It is in the hard tone of one who reasons not entirely with his convictions that he replies—

"If you ask me, have I ever felt utterly helpless and undone, I answer, Yes. If you ask whether I looked about in vain for a remedy and a palliative, I answer, No. This man is right. I have felt it a thousand times. The remedy is in my own hands. The palliative is to dwell continually on that remedy. What does he say? 'Endurance is indisputably the highest form of bravery, yet doth the slave endure his chain for lack of courage to throw it off. All depends upon the motive.' His inference is obvious. But I should not talk these matters over with you, dear Gertrude, who have never known sorrow. God forbid you should ever think as I do. Thank you for reading to me, and there's an end."

"Oh no!" she replies, with grave earnest tones. "I understand you better than you think. I too have known sorrow—deep and engrossing; and very hard to bear. Do not inquire how. I asked for strength and courage to endure it, Gilbert—I did indeed; and you don't know how much easier it became after that. This book may be very clever and logical and profound, but there is something in mankind more convincing than reason, and not a sentence of it speaks to the heart like that invitation in another book to the weary and heavy laden that they may have rest. Dear Gilbert, you have been very near death within the last few weeks. Think what would have become of you then!"

Why was his defiant spirit so easily roused to arms now? That last remark hardened him directly.

"I must have taken my chance," he said, with another jarring laugh. "We shall never think alike on these matters. Don't let us talk of them any more. I'm tired now."

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John Gordon, arriving with his humble valise in a Brighton fly, could not but see the cousins as he descended at the door of the mansion they inhabited. "They look very like lovers," thought John, with a tightening about that manly chest of his. "I suppose it's all settled by this time. From my soul I hope she'll be happy." And so Mr. Gordon composed his features and smoothed down his crisp black curls as the servant announced him; and Gilbert greeted him with almost boisterous cordiality, the while Gertrude gave him a very cold impassive hand, and never lifted her eyes to his face. You see this was what he had been working double-tides for to ensure a few hours' holiday—this was a judicious soother and consolatory sedative after the agitation of the journey down, none the less fervent that the strong man kept it so sternly repressed. This was another of the moments he had been looking forward to—though he would not confess it, of course—for a week—a month—never mind how long.

I have the pleasure of being acquainted with a very jovial old gentleman who was young in the days of real winters and long coaches, and who travelled outside the mail from London to Edinburgh in a bitter frost for the mere gratification of spending half an hour in the society of a damsel to whom he believed himself devoted. He had not seen her for several months, and had put himself to much trouble and inconvenience, besides the rotatory and refrigerating penance of the north mail, to procure this interview, hoping, not without reason, that it might be an agreeable surprise. How do you think she received him? The young lady was *en papillote*, a guise now fortunately exploded, and anything but becoming to the human face.

"It's *you*, is it?" she said, in tones far more suggestive of surprise than satisfaction. "Dear me! how tiresome! I wish I'd known in time to have taken my hair out of curl-papers."

The thaw had commenced when my friend went back; he travelled, moreover, inside, and in company with two stout ladies and a rich banker. He always affirmed, however, that he felt the cold far more biting on this second journey than the first.

John Gordon's inward temperature, as we know, does not affect his outward demeanour. He proceeds to dress for dinner, calmly and methodically, as we all do, whatever may be our hidden state of suffering or suspense. Do you think Hero forgot to do up her back hair before she ran down to the beach to meet Leander's body tossed on the mocking

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wave? Do you suppose Curtius had a speck on his flashing mail, or a buckle of his accoutrements awry, when he rode so straight at that last yawner which was to close over him for ever? Even the great Montrose went to his execution attired like a bridegroom; and Mary Stuart laid her head upon the block in the dress that best became that dangerous beauty which sorrow and imprisonment had not faded, which survived the loss of throne and friends and freedom—broken faith, broken fortunes, and a broken heart.

The dinner passed off slowly and formally enough. Lady Olivia, who presided, and who had been with difficulty persuaded by Lady Gertrude to take charge of her son's convalescence—the only method by which the latter could ensure having Gilbert under her own eye—was not at any time a lively acquisition to a small party. Moreover, she was annoyed at her enforced absence from London, and made no secret of her cordial hatred for Brighton. Bella Jones, the only guest besides John, seemed absent and out of sorts, which was not to be wondered at, considering all things. She and her father were living for economy in a small cottage outside the town, and the alderman's health was failing day by day. Poor Bella nursed him with unremitting assiduity: but it was weary work for the young girl, with no companions of her own age, and nothing to occupy her but the variable temper and peevish fancies of an invalid. The kind old alderman was sadly broke now. His mind appeared to be somewhat enfeebled as well as his body; and though he loved his daughter dearly, he worried her without ceasing from morning till night.

Even John Gordon's presence did not seem to brighten her up as it used to do. Kind Lady Gertrude had persuaded her aunt to ask Bella to meet him, thinking (so she said) "it would be such an agreeable surprise for both." I am not sure, however, that this was her real motive. So the party were somewhat at cross-purposes, as is often the case in our artificial life. Gilbert was too weak to sit up, and was lying on a sofa in the drawing-room, which accounted to John Gordon's entire satisfaction for Lady Gertrude's obvious pre-occupation and absence of mind. That sprightly damsel, usually so full of conversation and *savoir-vivre*, was to-day extremely silent, not to say stupid, and scarcely ever lifted those brilliant eyes of hers off her plate. They never met Mr. Gordon's once. The latter gentleman might have spared himself all anxiety about catching the train. I think his appetite would have been keener, and he would have made

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a better dinner at his club. Here he was, however, and he must make the best of it; so he listened patiently to Lady Olivia, who, being a little afraid of him, liked him better than most of her acquaintance. Lady Olivia's conversation was not interesting. It related chiefly to her disgust at her present residence, and the impositions practised on her by her servants. These topics, discussed in a loud harsh voice, without the slightest reserve, did not tend to raise her listeners' spirits; and when the ladies withdrew, and John was left alone with a voluminous dessert, and four full decanters—port, sherry, claret, and madeira—it is not surprising that he had not the heart to touch one or the other.

In the drawing-room it was worse. Gilbert, in one of the moody fits to which he had become so subject since his illness, had returned to his bedroom. Lady Olivia was fast asleep in an arm-chair, and, considering she had just begun sea-bathing, this was excusable enough. Gertrude had intrenched herself behind Bella and a tea-table, so that it was impossible to say two words to her in private, even had John's pride permitted him to entertain such a wish. Miss Jones was the most at her ease of the trio; but it was hardly to be expected that she could sustain the whole conversation single-handed; and after tea was taken away the *gêne* began to become oppressive. There was no pianoforte, so music was out of the question; and John could not go away, because he had a bed in the house. It was an immense relief when Bella rose to take her departure; and Gertrude, with a peculiarly immovable countenance, suggested to Mr. Gordon that he should escort her home. As the night was fine, they walked soberly off arm-in-arm, like a brother and sister, and I think one of them felt very distinctly that no warmer feeling now existed between them. The other was thinking of a cold proud face, and a clear pitiless voice that seemed to ring in his ears still.

"Good-night, Mr. Gordon, and good-bye, as you will be gone to-morrow morning before I shall be up."

Bella and John soon fell into confidential conversation. They talked of her father's losses quite unreservedly, of her present condition and future prospects. They both enjoyed their walk very much, and soon got back to old times and old recollections, and, above all, the dear abandoned villa. Bella betrayed much interest, and asked a thousand questions about the sale, wondering in her own mind which of her father's old friends it could have been that had sent her the parrot and the pianoforte, and a number of little household trifles, with such

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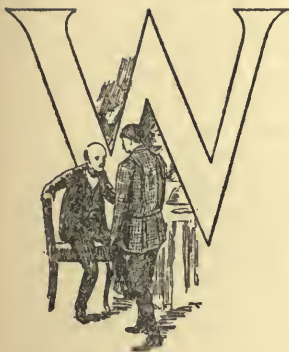
delicacy and kind feeling. To-night she was destined to be enlightened; for John, who had been successfully trying to raise her spirits by a comical rather than a mournful account of the proceedings, concluded his details of the auction's humours thus—

“But, above all, you would have laughed, Bella, if you could have seen Holyhead cantering about the Regent's Park with the cage and the parrot hanging to his arm!”

Happy Bella! It was too dark to see the blush that sprang to the roots of her hair; but she wished John good-night with a hearty squeeze that was the next thing to an embrace. She longed to kiss him—her kind, dear, good old John Gordon. And she went to bed, for the first time for months, with a glow of real indisputable happiness at her heart. No bad nightcap, reader. Alas! that, like other nightcaps, it should be so much out of vogue.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

WEST ACRES



WHAT an agreeable and thoroughly English life is that which our foreign friends envy us so sincerely, and which they call our *vie de chateau!* There is nothing the least like it abroad. Continental nations do not understand that pleasant intercourse which combines the polish of society with the cordiality of intimate friendship, nor do they appreciate the merits of that neutral territory on which it is so agreeable to meet, where formality can be forgotten without detriment to propriety and self-respect. Moreover, the women's complexions will not stand investigation at breakfast-time. It is too early an hour, and French, German, or Italian beauty prefers to have its coffee in its bedroom, and descend in elaborate toilette, armed at all points, about two or three p.m. It is only a handsome, healthy Englishwoman, like Lady Gertrude, who can come down at nine in the morning, fresh, clear, and *rayonnante*, dressed for the whole day.

After many years' absence, I was indeed interested to find myself again at West Acres. Gilbert, on his recovery, had pressed me earnestly to come and see him once more at the old place, where he meant to spend the autumn, and I willingly broke through those habits of reserve and indolence which had been growing upon me for so long; and steeling myself against memories on which it was a mockery now to dwell—memories from which time had plucked the sting, but never could efface the marks—I travelled down, as I had promised, into the west country, and arrived late at night towards the close of September, soon after the whole family had retired to rest.

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It was not till the following morning at breakfast that I had leisure to look about me, to identify the old familiar scenes of long ago, and to scrutinise the changes time had made in the few faces I ever cared to look on now. The party was small, but there was not one in whom I did not take an interest, either personal or for the sake of my boy. I had been fatigued with my journey, and slept long. When I came down, I was the last arrival at the breakfast-table but one. Lady Olivia, Lady Gertrude, Lord Holyhead, and John Gordon were already down; but my host's place was still vacant, and his letters lay by the side of his plate, ready for perusal against his appearance. I have a keen eye for trifles (if indeed there *are* such things as trifles; a minute grain of sand in the eye will cause as much suffering as a lance-head in the body), and it pained me to notice even so simple an indication of *insouciance* as these unopened letters. It argued such an utter want of interest in their contents, such a hopelessness that any post could bring him welcome intelligence, such a general depression and relaxation of mind thus to ignore the arrival of that which we all look forward to with more or less interest, that I could not but feel grieved and anxious even with respect to so unimportant an incident.

Lady Olivia received me with her usual cold politeness. Some natures are totally insensible to the power of association, and of such was her ladyship's. My presence did not seem to recall to her the bright days of yore, when West Acres was the centre of gaiety and hospitality—when the broken, miserable man who was now its owner was a laughing child, rich in the glorious inheritance of hope—when she herself had the opportunities for happiness in her own hands, and might have made a kindly and obedient wife to him who sank so helplessly at last into a drunkard's grave. Perhaps all this never occurred to her; and yet I have heard it said that even Lady Olivia once had a woman's heart in her bosom—that Ada's father, when the gay young Captain Glyn, had been the object of her first affections, and that it was his indifference to the high-born lady which drove her into a hasty and ill-assorted marriage, which made her a hard unfeeling woman ever afterwards. If this be indeed the truth, it is a strange, sad story.

She received me, however, with as little emotion as though I had been in the habit of breakfasting there every day; and I must confess that for the moment I envied her the armour of proof in which she seemed to be encased. Not so Lady Gertrude. Contrary to her wont, her hand trembled and her

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voice shook as she bade me good-morning; and I could see by the nervous agitation of her manner—the more remarkable in her who was usually so cool and composed—that the arrival of her old friend was fraught with much anxiety and many painful associations. I know now that she dreaded to hear my opinion as to the state of her cousin's health.

John Gordon and Holyhead were in the common disguise of English gentlemen who are going partridge-shooting. They both greeted me with a cordial welcome. The former, I observed, looked even graver and colder than his wont, but John's reserve I knew of old was so impenetrable, that it was hopeless to speculate on the demeanour of his outward man; and the peer, with a most enviable appetite for breakfast, made rather more noise and took up more room than usual.

"How late Gilbert is!" said Lady Gertrude, refilling the teapot with becoming assiduity. "Uncle Edward, did you see him last night when you arrived?"

There was no relationship between us, but Uncle Edward, I must here observe, was the name by which I was known in the family. It originated in some childish joke, and had never been discontinued. I answered in the negative; for I had been so much beyond my time that everybody had gone to bed. I could see Gertrude waited eagerly for my reply.

"He is not near well yet," she went on in a low hurried tone, and looking nervously at the door. "I hope the air and exercise will do him good. He used to be fond of shooting. But he must not walk too much. Over-exertion is so bad for him. You must take good care of him, Lord Holyhead, you and Mr. Gordon."

A wistful expression crossed the nobleman's face as she spoke, and he pushed his plate away, which was still half-full. John Gordon never looked up from his breakfast, nor did his iron mask vary one shade. Just then Gilbert made his appearance. He shook hands with me, and welcomed me to his house with almost the old boyish cordiality and gaiety. For a moment my heart leaped to think how well and strong he had grown once more, laughing to scorn the anxious fears which had oppressed me since I left him rescued from the very jaws of death in a sick-bed in London; it sank again a moment afterwards, when he sat quietly down to read his letters, and I could mark the settled gloom that pervaded his countenance in its repose. I did not like to observe him too narrowly; for every now and then I caught his eye glancing stealthily up from his occupation, as if jealous of being watched. There was a glare in it too, like that of some wild

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animal in a noose. It puzzled me, that strange unreasoning look. I had seen something like it in other eyes before, but I shuddered to think where I had seen those eyes, and whose they were. For the rest his brown hair was worn thin, and streaked with whole patches of grey—his forehead was wrinkled—his features sunk, and there were deep lines about his mouth that told of worse than sickness and physical suffering. Altogether, he looked ten years older than when I had seen him last, even in the crisis of his malady. It seemed impossible that this could be the young Apollo of a dozen years ago. It was touching to mark the very attitude I knew so well. The same in which he used to bend over his studies ere he jumped up with some light jest to fling the book away, and stand before me the impersonation of youth, and health, and hope, and budding manhood. His gestures were never impatient now. He moved like a man under some heavy weight. Every limb seemed to drag listlessly and slowly, as if shackled. Where was the graceful freedom of the athlete? And Lady Olivia was the only person that could not, or that would not, see this great and awful change!

I was obliged to dissemble my emotion. The present was no time for ill-judged sympathy or impertinent criticism. I felt that Lady Gertrude was watching me with eager interest to compare my first impressions with her own. Once our eyes met. I had need of all my self-command then not to betray my sorrows and my fears. She came to the rescue, however, with the kind tact in which she never failed. One or two letters from the pile beside her plate were already opened, and, as the conversation was slackening wofully, she began to enlighten us as to their contents. The general news and gossip of the day was welcome to all her listeners, and even Gilbert looked up and betrayed an interest in his cousin's correspondence. Lord Holyhead, too, was full of jokes and curiosity.

"There is one left, Lady Gertrude," said he, "that you have not read to us. Of course it's the cream of the whole lot. From a lady, too; I can tell by the colour of the envelope. Now do indulge us with a breach of confidence, and read it from beginning to end."

Lady Gertrude smiled and glanced restlessly at John Gordon, while she answered Lord Holyhead—

"It's from Bella Jones," said she, without looking at the latter; "poor dear! it's a long journey for her, but she will be here by dinner-time."

Gaiters must be inconvenient appendages, even for a

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sportsman, if they often require so much attention during breakfast as did Lord Holyhead's at this juncture. Perhaps I was the only person who remarked how very much he flushed in consequence of stooping to buckle those defences. He soon recovered himself, however. It is only boys and girls who cannot readjust the domino at a moment's notice, should the wearer indeed be sufficiently clumsy to let it slip off at all. Holyhead had been too often to the *masquerade* to remain long at fault.

"How is her father?" he inquired, in rather a loud off-hand tone—"does she say anything about him?—and when do you expect her?"

"He is better," replied her ladyship, "or Bella would not be coming here. She ought to arrive to-day by the four o'clock train—the one Uncle Edward contrived to miss yesterday, in his unwillingness to tear himself from London."

"Ah, Lady Gertrude!" said I, "my London and yours have very different significations. You could not even find your way about those sober regions which lie at the back of the British Museum, and which people used to call Mesopotamia when I was young; and I should be equally lost in your gay and glittering May Fair, the enchanted land you are so fond of, only fit for fairies like yourself."

Lady Gertrude sighed.

"You may well call it fairyland, Uncle Edward," said she; "you have no idea how soon the glamour wears off. The gingerbread is none the better in Vanity Fair for being gilt, and they gild it very badly after all; don't you think so?"

"Gingerbread is very unwholesome," remarked Lady Olivia, "and for my part, I can't say I see the merit of it. That reminds me, Gilbert—have you given any orders about luncheon?"

"Yes, mother," replied her son, waking out of a fit of abstraction; "I have seen the keepers. We can take Elmhurst and Rosebank in one beat. So if Gertrude likes to join us at the top of Marigold Lane, in the pony-carriage, she can bring the luncheon. Then we shall have the forty acres and the home farm for the afternoon; not a gun has been fired there yet; we ought to get fifty brace."

The two sportsmen emitted that low murmur of approbation with which such announcements are usually received, and Gertrude also seemed to coincide with the proposed arrangements.

"You will come with me, Uncle Edward?" said she; "I want to show you the new lodges, and then I can drop you

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when you are tired of me, and drive to the station for Bella. By the bye, the cart can go for her things, as she has no maid."

"Do you mean she is coming quite by herself?" exclaimed Lord Holyhead; and for the moment I think he regretted the earnest nature of his costume, which would admit of no compromise as to his purpose, and the keen attachment he had always displayed for the sports of the field, which made it impossible to shirk off and attend at the railway station.

"Why not?" said Lady Gertrude. "The young ladies of the present day are very independent, and it is high time, in my opinion. We women are determined at last to assert our rights. We have been kept down quite long enough."

She glanced quickly at John Gordon as she spoke, but he was conversing with Lady Olivia in a low tone, and either did not hear or did not notice her remark.

All this time Gilbert was reading his letters without apparently deriving the slightest information from their contents. His breakfast consisted of a single cup of coffee and a morsel of bread. Without further sustenance, Lady Gertrude whispered to me, he would go through the hardest day's work, and at dinner would be nearly as abstemious in his eating, though he drank hard, and with a sort of fretful impatience, like a man in pain. No wonder he looked so ill, no wonder his form was so wasted and his eyes so wild.

"Had not Lady Olivia noticed it?" I asked. "Was she not anxious about her son?"

"Not till I pointed it out to her," she answered—"not till I told her how alarmed all his friends were about him, and that I thought myself he had one foot in the grave."

"Did she not take fright then?" I asked, remembering that even Lady Olivia was a mother.

"She said his system probably wanted bracing, and recommended homœopathy," was the reply.

It seemed only yesterday I had seen the brave, bright child fall with his pony in the park, had marked him appeal instinctively to his only parent for sympathy and assistance, and had wondered how she could refuse it so coldly. How well I remembered it all! I walked into the library to write my letters with a heavy heart.

CHAPTER XXXIX

FAMILY LIKENESSES

BUT I could not get on with my letters. Do what I would, it was impossible to force my thoughts into any other channel than that in which they persisted in flowing. Here was I once more in the old house at West Acres—once more under that well-remembered roof; why, there was not a brick in its whole structure, not a tree in the park, nor a walk in the shrubbery, that was not to me alive with painful memories and bitter-sweet associations. I did not dare draw up the blinds of the very window over against which I sat; and yet why not? I had been seeing that elm avenue every day for forty years. It would look to-day with the sun on it just as it did *that* time. My hair is worn and grey, my limbs are wasted, my form bent, and my teeth gone, yet even now I cannot see the sunlight flickering through an elm-tree, or the tender fern waving in the breeze, but that, were it not for very shame, I would fain turn aside and weep. I have been a man of peace all my life, useless, it may be, and but a blade of tares amongst the wheat—an unprofitable servant indeed, and a helpless, but I have never been an overt and presumptuous rebel. I have committed no heinous and unpardonable crime. I am no murderer, no suborner, no thief. Why must I be haunted for ever with that one ineffaceable picture? Is my punishment, like Cain's, to be greater than I can bear? Two are pacing up and down the last forty yards of that arch-roofed avenue—the rich autumn cornfields are studded with ricks and glowing in the noonday glare—the cattle are standing knee-deep in the shrunken bed of the broad shallow river; myriads of insects circle in the sunbeams as they stream athwart the long perspective of the glade. It is a time of ripened promise, of matured beauty, of reward and fruition throughout all nature. And still those two pace backwards and forwards, every turn threatening to be the last, and still the one pleads with tearful eagerness and still the other's

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face is turned haughtily and pitilessly away. So they parted in anger, and met—never again—never again.

Years rolled on, so painful and harassing whilst there was hope, so long and dreary when doubt had sunk into certainty. The blow was felt over and over again in anticipation before it fell—there was no fresh place left in which another sting could be planted when the last stroke was dealt upon the numbed and stupefied sufferer. Then the grave closed over the one, and the other buried heart and hope for evermore. Since that the pilgrimage seems to have no landmarks. Tardy and noiseless, yet with something soothing in its monotony, has been the journey over that wide waste of sand. Palm-trees and springs of gushing water have not lain in the wayfarer's track, and there is no mirage for eyes that were dimmed so long ago with tears. Nevertheless, we may count our footsteps now, for we cannot but be near the end. It must be that soon we shall see the blue sea sparkling in the horizon, and the white shroud-like sail that is waiting to waft us home.

There are many consolations for the aged which the young can never be brought to understand. If our joys are not so keen as yours, my blooming minor, we do not chafe and fret and fight with the wind under our griefs. A certain resignation, less the result of content than of hopelessness, forbids us to kick with our gouty feet against the pricks. We accept the bitter potion, so to speak, and gulp it down with a wry face. Whereas you must needs shout and struggle, and have your nose held, and swallow it the wrong way after all, till you extract twice its natural nausea from the draught. But there is one pang that probes us very sharply, from which you are exempt. One reflection that makes us feel very sad and uncomfortable, that causes you too often to deem us meddlers and officious and unkind. When time and necessity have reconciled us to our own shipwreck—when, though we can never forget it, we have ceased to dwell upon the hour that saw our goodly vessel broken up, and our precious cargo heaving on the wave—it does gall us to mark your young confidence steering straight for the hidden reef—it does grieve us to see you too swamped and engulfed in the briny waters, stretching madly at the illusive spar that dances just beyond your reach, turning wild eyes to the pitiless heaven that seems to mock your need and your despair.

It is the recollections inspired by this old library that have made me so sombre a moralist to-day—this old library, in which I had spent so many hours of study, so many hours of

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dreamy listless abstraction. It was a beautiful room, too, and thoroughly in keeping with the fine old place. It is needless to describe it: people always skip descriptions, and, truth to tell, I could never, for as often as I have perused it, take a thorough inventory of its contents. My eye was always arrested by a certain picture which hung above the lofty chimneypiece—a picture painted long ago by an unknown artist, yet of extraordinary merit, and worked out with a skill and knowledge of light and shade not unworthy of Rembrandt himself. It represented a young man of considerable beauty, with the brown hair and rich complexion hereditary in the Ormes, dressed in the gorgeous apparel of Charles II.'s reign; and I remember that connoisseurs could never sufficiently praise the skill with which the artist had wrought out the elaborate ornaments and details of his costume, while at the same time he kept them down in the deep shadow that was indispensable to the development of his conception. Two or three subordinate figures in the background were carousing round a table, and the broad humour of their jollity, with a certain coarseness of expression and attitude, might have been borrowed from the Dutch school. But the principal character was essentially an original creation. Standing forward, with a half-emptied goblet in his hand, he seemed to be giving some toast of more unbridled audacity than even his boon-companions could appreciate or understand. His full lip curled with an expression in which joviality, recklessness, and a certain sorrowing self-contempt were strangely mingled; but it was in the eyes the painter had displayed the whole power and resources of his genius. Deep, wild, and piercing, they seemed to flash from out the canvas, and yet there was a subdued melancholy in their expression truly touching. The effect was so lifelike as to be startling, even unpleasant. I remember that Lady Gertrude when a child used to make faces and shake her little fist through the closed door at the dreaded picture, but that when brought into the room she would scream to be taken away in an access of horror at her aversion. "I want to go, I want to go," she would repeat, "I don't like its eyes!" And many a time have I carried her into the drawing-room, and soothed down her terror with her picture-books and her toys. There was a story too, connected with the painting, a legend of the house that gratified the pride of the Ormes, as people are proud of any notoriety, good or evil, which has distinguished some member of their family long ago. We can boast of our pedigrees, we mushrooms of the West; and yet we can despise the lineage of a

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Jew who counts back to the building of the Temple; or an Arab whose progenitor, a man of ancient family then, stood by Mahomet in the cave. I am not sure but that these same pedigrees are valued in proportion to their brevity. I have heard that, now they have had time to own grandfathers, the Yankees are beginning to talk about their ancestors. Well, perhaps it is an amiable weakness after all; certainly a cheap and innocent display. I believe for five-and-twenty pounds the Heralds' College will trace you up to royalty in the tenth or twelfth generation; and who, for the trifling consideration of a "pony," but would choose to be so near the purple as that? They need not have been so proud of him, though, for after all there was not much to boast of in this scion of the House of Orme, nor in his history. I have been told the legend over and over again. I believe it to be a true story. I can remember every word of it. Here it is:—

Frank Orme was a second son. Like many other second sons, his fortune was meagre, his position very galling to a proud, undisciplined spirit. His elder brother, Rufane, was not the man to smooth his difficulties, or to lend him a helping hand in the little scrapes and petty troubles which then, as now, embarrassed the lot of younger brothers with high spirits and low incomes. Rufane was a morose, unamiable person, conscientious in the discharge of what he considered his duties, but making no allowances for the slightest dereliction on the part of others, and altogether a characteristic specimen of the party to which he adhered. When the troubles began, Rufane had espoused the side of the Parliament, and become, moreover, a tolerably rigid Presbyterian. Nor did he confine his political tenets to abstruse speculations. He led out his tenants under Essex, sorely against their will, to do battle with the king, and had once the honour of exchanging sword-thrusts with Prince Rupert in a charge. It was well for Mr. Orme that he wore a breastplate of proof on that occasion; also that the prince, who swept down upon him like a hawk, had other matters to attend to than a repetition of his thrust. Frank of course adopted the other side, and made his first essay in arms as a stripling at Edgehill. His childish face was as forward amongst the pikes of the rebels as many a rugged veteran's, and the boy seemed to take kindly and naturally to the trade of slaughter. After such a demonstration the brothers of course became avowed enemies; but even this open hatred, bitter as it was, and unnatural between two of the same blood, was preferable to the malice that had been rankling for years. A thousand

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little everyday occurrences had long embittered them against each other; and if Rufane's was a disposition not to overlook an offence, Frank's was one that could neither forgive nor forget an injury. Scenes of insult and humiliation had made a deep impression in the younger brother's breast. It was a custom in the family to close the carousals, of which they were all somewhat too fond, with a parting toast—"To our next merry meeting!" and the practice had not been suffered to die out in Rufane Orme's time, who, Puritan as he was, showed no disinclination to such pleasures of the senses as were permitted by his creed. One bright summer's evening the brothers sat together at the supper-table. They were alone in the world those two—father and mother sleeping in the vaults of the old church yonder amongst the trees. No nearer relative than a cousin, whom they had never seen; nothing to divide them but their own evil passions and wayward hearts. How they ought to have loved and clung to each other! A flagon stood between them on the supper-table. The wine blushed and sparkled in the glow of sunset. Rufane drank deeply, and with a dogged sullen air; already his brow was flushed, and his features swollen with his potations. Frank's cup stood untasted before him, and neither spoke a word.

At last the younger brother broke silence with an allusion to their previous conversation.

"Not so much as would purchase a horse and a sword! If I lived you should be repaid with interest. The Ormes have never been unsuccessful soldiers. If I fall, you will be spared the charges to which you are now put for a morsel of food and a cup of wine."

He spoke in anything but the conciliatory tones of a borrower. There was bitter hatred and a keen irony in every compressed syllable.

"You are not obliged to go," answered the elder, in a cool, careless voice, inexpressibly irritating to the chafing spirit of the boy. "If you knew your duty you would remain in the station in which you have been placed, therewith to be content. But, go or stay, it is no affair of mine. You have your portion; I do not choose to interfere."

The boy's fury blazed out.

"My portion!" he repeated. "The wages of a groom or a falconer! No, brother, I will not be indebted to you; you have said it yourself. Not another morsel will I eat, not another drop will I drink, beneath your roof. This very night I will ride away before the moon is up. I leave you;

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I despise you; I renounce you. When I have made myself a name, and you come cringing to claim kindred with me, I will abjure you, and proclaim to the world how false-hearted and mean and ungenerous you were."

He rose while he spoke, but his young heart smote him as he glanced at the old church-tower, and he turned and put out his hand.

"I shall never see you again," he said, his voice faltering a little, "so we need not part in anger now. Rufane, do you remember our mother?"

"I do," answered the other, in the same cold grating voice, refilling the cup at his elbow the while; "and how she warned you against that undutiful and rebellious spirit of yours, which was sure to bring you to evil."

The other ground his teeth and turned upon his heel; but even then his mother's face rose before him—the face he used to drag down with his two little arms so laughingly to meet his own—the face he had seen long ago white and beautiful in its coffin, when he thought his heart was broken for evermore. He looked back, less in anger than reproach.

"I will bear you no malice," he said. "Brother, for the last time, farewell!"

The other lifted his full cup with a sneering smile. "To our next merry meeting!" he replied, and, emptying it at a draught, leaned back in his chair, and closed his eyes either in real or feigned repose.

When he opened them he was alone; and he never saw his brother's face again but once.

The battle of Worcester was fast degenerating into a rout. The streets of the town were filling with pursuers and pursued. The third Stuart had played his last stake for a crown—and lost. It was a question now of saving the person of the king. Covering his flight, a body of Royalist cavalry made a succession of brilliant and desperate charges, leaving at every fresh effort some cavalier of name and distinction on the field. In these onsets Frank Orme signalled himself by a headlong gallantry and personal prowess worthy of a disciple of Prince Rupert, and was largely instrumental in checking, although he could not repulse, the overwhelming squadrons of the Protector. As he made his final effort, which enabled Charles to escape, his horse's bridle was seized by an officer of the enemy's cavalry. His sword was already broken, and quick as lightning he drew a pistol from his holster and shot his assailant through the body. The next instant his charger

was clattering masterless up the street, and he was bending in an agony of remorse and horror over the dying man.

Yes, the pale face contracted in its last spasm was no other than Rufane's. All unconsciously in the confusion of the struggle Frank felt his hand was red with a brother's blood. He strove to stanch the wound, but in vain. He strove to wrest a word of reconciliation or pardon from those writhing lips, but the bullet had done its duty too well. Regardless of his own danger, of the king, of the routed army, of everything but the gasping sufferer before him, he implored Rufane but for one word, one token, that should lift the curse from his own head ere his brother passed away. Once he thought the black lips moved, and a stifled murmur seemed to gurgle up through the blood that was choking the fallen man. He bent down and listened with wild terror. He sprang to his feet then and caught a loose horse, and sped away like a madman. Something he had heard froze the very fountain of his heart. He rode as if chased by furies. Shot at by the pursuing Parliamentarians, he seemed to bear a charmed life. And still he galloped on, that awful murmur ringing and surging in his ears. "To our next merry meeting!" It was not fancy, it was not the trick of memory played on an excited imagination, for he had bent down to catch his brother's last words, and listened for them as one listens for the sentence of life or death. They were plain enough, though the dying lips moved so faintly, and the whisper was hoarse with exhaustion. Every breeze that swept by repeated them, every stroke of his horse's gallop kept time to the ghastly refrain, "To our next merry meeting!"

It matters little how he reached Boscobel, and followed the fortunes of his fugitive sovereign, to return with him at the Restoration, and enter in triumph on the goodly inheritance of the Ormes. Remorse has a different effect on different minds. For some, the thorny path leads slowly and painfully up the mountain, to reach the springs of life and hope at last, fresher and purer and more reviving as they gush from the bare granite, than when stealing sluggishly along through the fat pastures of the level valley below. Others it goads downwards into the broad easy road—the descent that grows smoother and steeper at every milestone—the journey that can be performed as surely and expeditiously on a cripple's crutches as in a coach-and-six—that terminates at those gates which open wide to receive all comers, but which can be passed but once, for thence there is no return.

Frank Orme—the lord of West Acres, a king's favourite,

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a gentleman of name and position—was a very different person from Frank Orme the chafing, discontented, and morose younger brother, yet would he willingly have given all he was worth twice over to be able to undo the deed that had placed him in possession of his present advantages. A curse seemed to hang over him, which neither employment nor excitement nor prosperity could take off. He sat in a corrupt parliament, and devoted no mean talents to political intrigue and the promptings of ambition in vain. He attended a dissolute court, and failed to find forgetfulness in the smiles of beauty or the favour of royalty itself. As a last resource he married—rather a bad compliment to the lady; but then, as now, the fair sex were not averse to the task of reforming a sinner (*bien entendu* not a sinner in rags, but a sinner in purple). The last effort seemed no whit more successful than its predecessors. There is a picture of the lady and her boy in one of the bedrooms, a dove-eyed dame with a fair foolish face, and to all appearance her stays outside her dress, nursing a curly-headed urchin, who shows no slight resemblance to the stock from which he sprang; the whole depicted under a blue curtain with a crimson sunset in the distance. He did not love the foolish face, but he made it a kind, cold, indifferent husband, and it consoled itself perhaps as best it might; or perhaps it paled and pined and longed in secret, and so grew old before its time. Who knows? It is full two hundred years ago. Who cares? They are hideous ornaments, those stiff family pictures, yet are they suggestive representations nevertheless. Before he was thirty Frank Orme was a doomed man.

Like many another who looks here and there, before and behind, around and below—everywhere but above—for some distraction, some palliative of the pain rankling at his heart, the lord of West Acres tried the same remedy that might have been selected by any ignorant clown on his estate. Drenched with wine, and maddened with licentious shouting revelry, he could forget for a few hours; and then, when the spectre drew aside his curtain and woke him to memory, what resource had he but to drown it once again? There must have been something weak in the *morale* of these Ormes. They were a gallant race and a gifted, from father to son, but they seem to have been incapable of facing unaided the misgivings or the sorrows which their own imaginations conjured up. Frank found no pleasure save in these brutal orgies, and it was strange that, to whatever excesses they were carried, he never neglected that parting toast, "To our next merry

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meeting!" giving it out with a ghastly mockery of gaiety as if in defiance of some invisible agency, and quaffing off his wine in its honour with the reckless mirth of despair.

By his own desire and from some morbid feeling which we could not and would not anatomise, he was painted in the act of pledging his accustomed toast. It is probable that the artist whom he employed had assisted him more than once in draining a flagon to do it justice. Time after time were his boon-companions half startled, half amused, at the increasing wildness of his voice and gestures when he enunciated the well-known sentence; time after time they winked and shrugged their shoulders, and touched their wine-sodden foreheads with owlish gravity; but those who drink at a man's charges are usually the last to interfere with his whims; and the Ormes were a race that seldom listened to advice, certainly that never brooked reproof.

At last, one afternoon, the foolish face, sitting with her child, was startled by a visit from her husband. He spoke more kindly to her than was his wont, and took more notice of his boy. Then he bade her farewell. "He was going a journey," he said, "not a very long one, yet for which some preparation must be made. He should mount his horse after dinner, to which he had invited a few friends. Life was uncertain: in case of accident, he had come to wish her good-bye. She had been a good wife to him."

Emboldened by this unaccustomed tone, the foolish face brightened up, and asked whether she might not take her place at the dinner-table as he was to depart so soon? That handsome brow of his could look very black on occasion. It darkened now as he answered harshly in the negative. But he kissed her on the forehead directly afterwards, and bade her farewell very kindly once more. Poor woman! she treasured up that caress to her dying day.

Then Frank Orme gathered his boon-companions about him, and laugh and shout and song madé the rafters ring. At last he pledged them all in a double measure with the well-known toast, "To our next merry meeting!" crushed the empty cup beneath his heel, and so, without another word, walked to the door, mounted his horse, and was gone.

By midnight, the horse came quietly back to his stable. By noon of the next day a lad found—Mr. Orme's hat, gloves, and cloak under an old oak-tree about two miles from West Acres. When that lad died a man of fourscore, the master had not returned. His fate has been a mystery ever since. The foolish face mourned for him, they say, and waited long

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before she married again ; and the curly-headed child sat in its father's chair. Some people affirm that father appears to his descendants even now. I know the late Mr. Orme fancied he saw him more than once, but this was when his mind was failing, and shortly previous to his own decease. It is a queer story—none the less so for the wild expression of the picture. I wonder where he met his brother Rufane, and whether they are reconciled now ?

“Uncle Edward, are you not coming ?” said a voice at my elbow, “and how idle you are ! A whole morning gone, and not a letter ready for the post.”

Lady Gertrude, in a provoking little hat, was standing by my side. I did not hear her come into the room, so engrossed was I with my meditations.

“I will put them off till to-morrow,” I replied ; “the fact is, my dear, I am getting old and dreamy. I have been thinking of the past, and looking at that picture.”

Her glance followed mine, and for an instant the childish expression of terror came back into her face.

“That picture !” she said, “I wish they would take it away ; I have a horror of it. Oh, Uncle Edward ! do you see it too ? Is not Gilbert getting like it, especially about the eyes ?”

CHAPTER XL

LADY WILFUL

IT was a relief to get out of doors. I seemed to breathe more freely in that pure warm air. The last days of September were going out with the rich tints of autumn and the sunny skies of June. The scarlet geraniums in the flower-garden surfeited the eye with their bright masses loading the shaven sward; the tall hollyhocks reared their gaudy rosettes above a splendid confusion of verbena, petunia, anemone, and calceolaria spangled with spots of gold. The pendent fuchsias drooped in their last loveliness, and the sweet heliotrope exhaled her dying fragrance ere she sank to decay. Only the roses were past. All was left that could extort admiration, but the balmy scent that gives its dearest charm to the summer garden was gone with the summer prime. So it is in life. Rich and bright in its meridian splendour—deep are the hues and noble is the beauty of success; but who would not give it all *so* willingly but for one breath of the hopeful sweetness that pervaded those showery mornings in May?

Gertrude was proud of her driving, and not without reason; she managed two high-bred, spirited ponies with considerable skill. We had no servant with us, as the groom who was to accompany her when she dropped me had gone on to our trysting place with the sportsmen. As we swept round a turn in the avenue a deer that had been couching in the fern suddenly sprang to its feet, and bounded across the road immediately in front of the ponies' heads. One of them took fright and tried to turn round. My fair charioteer's brows went down and her lips shut tight as she administered two or three sharp cuts which brought the rebel to obedience, then the pretty face cleared, and she soothed and caressed him with the end of the whip, and spoke to him in gentle conciliatory tones, which the animal seemed perfectly to understand. I wonder if she read my thoughts, for she turned to me with her meaning air, and said—

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"Do you remember, Uncle Edward, when you used to call me Lady Wilful, and tell me the fairy tale about what happened to the princess who would have her own way?"

"You have yours with the ponies, at anyrate," I replied. "Your system, I see, is one of rewards and punishments. Do you not think, however, it would be better to try the caresses first? Or perhaps you consider they are the more welcome for the flogging that precedes them."

I think she was answering her own thoughts when she replied, for she looked straight between the ponies' heads far beyond the new lodges which we were rapidly approaching.

"I believe a strong will is best counteracted by a stronger than itself. I believe all creatures, not excepting the human race, are prone to despise the yielding and to give way before the firm. And yet it is far more painful to insist than to concede. But it never answers to give in, never! Fancy, Uncle Edward, if I had let that pony turn round! why, we should have been back at the hall door by this time."

"And if *he* had insisted," said I—"for after all he is much stronger than both of us put together—and you had thought proper to fight it out?"

"Then the carriage would have been broken all to pieces, and you and I had to trudge home on foot. You see somebody must get the worst of it."

This feminine argument was conclusive. I recognised in it the principle that has held the sexes in equipoise so many thousand years. I remembered our mother, and the apple her honest husband would never have dreamed of touching but for her. I did not forget Samson with his head in that coaxing Philistine's lap. A vision came across me of routed legions and galleys scattered like scared waterfowl over the blue southern sea, and frank-hearted Antony destroyed because dark Egypt smiled. It needed not to go back into history to find parallel examples. I thought of many a bright joyous comrade and many a trusty friend. I thought—no, I dared not think—of the story I knew best of all, but I subscribed sincerely to the sentence, "Somebody *must* get the worst of it"; and it is not the least generous, the least trusting, the least devoted, that is to get the worst. No; in this, as in other matters, they take sufficient care that the so-called weakest shall not go to the wall.

We stopped at the lodges, and inspected the progress that had been already made. We looked down across the park to where the chimneys and gables of the hall peeped through a mass of towering elms, and a thin smoke curled upward into

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that blue sky laced with a streak of silvery clouds. The lake at our feet glowed like burnished gold, and the woods beyond seemed sleeping, hushed, and still, in the hot haze of noon. The same thought, I am sure, crossed each of our minds at the same moment. "To be lord of all this and not to be happy!" was my inward reflection; and Gertrude, touching the ponies with her whip, broke silence, and put the carriage in motion at the same time.

"What a deal Gilbert might do here," said she, "if he were only to turn his mind to it; and it would be the best cure for himself at the same time. Uncle Edward, I want to ask your advice. What do you think ought to be done about Gilbert?"

It was a comprehensive question, and she put it with the clear penetrating look that sat so well on her fair young face. I know not what prompted me to answer as I did. I know not why, being so intimate as I was with both, I should have chosen not to be sure that her feelings towards her cousin were like those of a sister for a brother, scarcely less, certainly not more. I looked full into her eyes as I replied—

"He ought to marry; I see no other chance of saving him from everything that is worst."

"Ah! if he would do that," said she, with the same clear bright look, "it would make us all so happy. But do you think there is any hope of it? Are you sure if he did he would not make bad worse? I thought you were more or less romantic than the rest of us, Uncle Edward, and did not consider marriage the universal panacea for improvement when everything else has failed."

She read my thoughts pretty clearly. I have never lowered the richest blessing earth can bestow to a mere remedy for dissipation—never looked upon the troth-pledge of a pure and loving woman as the safety-valve that shall possibly check the excesses of a wild young man.

"If he married someone who could guide as well as interest him," was my answer, "whom he respected as well as loved, I do believe that even now it would not be too late. Such a wife would make him a different being here and hereafter. You know as well as I do how much good there is about Gilbert, how generous and forgiving he is, how sensitive to kindness, how easily led by his affections."

The bright eyes were filling fast with tears, but the little hands guided the driving-reins to an inch. Old fool that I was! I must needs put my oar into waters already sufficiently troubled. I who ought to have known, who did know,

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that it was simply impossible, must needs subscribe for the moment to the conclusions of the gossiping circle of relatives and friends, who dispose in theory of the feelings and affections as readily as of the prospects and fortunes of another.

"I only know one person," I resumed, "who has it in her power to rescue Gilbert now. I wish I was as sure of her willingness as her ability."

I looked straight in her face while I spoke. She met my eye quite calmly; not a shade of confusion darkened her fair open brow, but there was something bitter and unhappy about the expression of her mouth, as she replied—

"I know what you mean, Uncle Edward; but it will never be. Once, I grant you, it was not impossible; now it is completely out of the question. Dear Gilbert! how happy he would be with anyone who was really fond of him, and how happy she would be too! Where shall we find the princess, Uncle Edward? Is she coming, think you, in a coach-and-six with outriders, like Cinderella at eleven o'clock at night, or in rags and tatters, like poor Cinderella at one in the morning? I think, if I know my cousin, the rags will have it. I wish I could see her, though, whether she came in pattens or glass slippers! As for me," she added, brightening up, with a joyous sunshiny look that did my heart good— "(Steady, ponies! I won't have you start off because you hear a shot fired)—as for me, I shall never marry, but remain Lady Wilful to the end of the chapter."

"We like you very much as you are," was my reply, as the carriage stopped at the turn down Marigold Lane, and we espied the three sportsmen wading knee-deep in a field of swedes; "but you would not be a woman if you were not liable to change your mind; and it don't follow that because you promise some deluded victim to obey him, you should not continue to be Lady Wilful afterwards just the same."

She was not listening to me, for just then a brace of partridges got up before John Gordon, and he shot them right and left.

What fun they had in that field of swedes! How they traversed it backwards and forwards, lengthwise and crosswise, up and down, and beat it every inch! How steady was that sagacious old pointer, whose duties were limited to the quest after dead game and baffling pursuit of runners, of which I am bound to say there were indeed but few! The three gentlemen were no uncertain shots, and so surely as the russet partridge whirred up from its variegated covert, so

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surely it went down, shot dead and true, before one or other of those unerring barrels. How grim and unmoved was the broad-shouldered keeper! An institution at West Acres was that man of superhuman gravity, who was never known to smile, but who entered into every detail of his profession with a reverent earnestness as of one who lived for nothing else in the world. He was not without a sort of dry humour, nevertheless, and a *bon-mot* of Orme's old keeper had even found its way to the clubs in St. James's Street. It was produced at Flippant's expense, who, although a deadly shot, had suffered a woodcock to escape him whilst draining his sherry flask in the middle ride of West Acres wood on occasion of a large battue, and was ever afterwards spoken of by the keeper as "the London gentleman as didn't seem to take much notice."

How the stable-boy in the rear, ordered out on a young horse for the purpose of marking the wilder coveys, scamp-ered hither and thither! Not doing much in the way of observation, certainly, but finishing countless imaginary Derbys and St. Legers, with his hands down, his feet rammed home in the stirrups, to his own boundless satisfaction, and the general agitation and discomfiture of the young horse. How another assistant, following with beer, made repeated applications to that fluid, till his face shone rubicund under the influence of its own innate health, combined with a mild stage of intoxication, and exposed to a broiling sun! How John Gordon walked untiring, with his iron muscles and his indefatigable stride, and rarely missed and never smiled; how Gilbert, with his light springy step, and a certain grace of gesture which never left him, reminded me of the Gilbert of old times; and lastly, how cheery and gladsome was Holyhead's manly face as he sprang over the fence into the lane, and announced his delight at our arrival, and the extreme rapacity of his inner man for the good things with which we had come provided!

"Two-and-thirty brace, Lady Gertrude!" exclaimed the peer in triumph; "and the practice, though I say it that shouldn't, remarkably accurate. Do you know, Gordon has scarcely missed a shot the whole morning. We've all done well, and now exhausted nature must sink without supplies. What have you brought? Sandwiches? good! Cold pie? good! Sherry? very good! And a bottle of claret. My old friend at my elbow again! Lady Gertrude, you come like the Goddess of Plenty to the thirstiest of your worshippers. Here's your good health."

Holyhead drained his glass with exceeding goodwill,

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applying himself thereafter to the pie with an earnestness that stopped his mouth for a season most effectually. In the meantime Gilbert and Gordon had laid their guns aside, and came up to the pony-carriage to welcome its inmates and its provisions, though with far less energy than their demonstrative companion. My boy looked more like himself than I had seen him for a long time. His eye was bright with the excitement of the sport, and hard exercise had brought a healthy colour to his cheek; but I listened in vain for the good-humoured banter and flow of lively fanciful conversation which used to make him the life and soul of a party like the present. Alas! a ribald sentiment or a bitter sarcasm was the nearest approach to mirth that ever now crossed the lips of Gilbert Orme. John's talent for silence, too, had wonderfully increased of late, particularly in Lady Gertrude's presence. Formerly they were never tired of appealing to each other on the most trivial subjects, and would wrangle good-humouredly upon every possible topic from morning till night; now they only exchanged words when it was unavoidable, and even then I could not help remarking that their eyes never met. It was for Holyhead to keep us all in good spirits. He had already discussed a capital luncheon, and whilst he puffed at his cigar was deep in an argument with Lady Gertrude upon the charms of partridge-shooting. His was one of those enviable dispositions which take their most vivid colouring from the objects immediately surrounding them. Holyhead was always engrossed with the present occupation or amusement. If he was hunting, life seemed to have nothing to offer equal to the stride of a good horse and the pace of a pack of foxhounds. If he was deer-stalking, the essence of poetry and delight was comprised in the dim mountain and the distant herd, the deep corrie, and the wreathing mist rising like a curtain from the black fastnesses of the glen. In salmon-fishing he vowed there was no music to him like the spin of a reel, and the swirl of a rushing stream; whilst of all sports in the world, he declared to-day, none could vie with such a morning's shooting and such a luncheon as the present.

Lady Gertrude admitted the merits of the luncheon, "But surely," said she, "you don't call this like being on a Highland hill, up to your knees in heather, with fifty brace of grouse in the creels?"

"Infinitely superior," answered Holyhead, with a vigorous application to the claret; "I cannot admit the comparison. Look at the variety of a day's shooting in a low country. The constant change of scene—the snug farm on the rising

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ground—the pretty village in the valley—the rich autumnal woods to back those slopes of bright yellow and intense green. Luxuriant hedgerows everywhere—a gleaming river gliding peacefully to the sea through a perfect wilderness of beauty in the distance, and—Lady Gertrude with her pony-carriage for a foreground!”

We all applauded his lordship's eloquence. Gilbert slapped him on the back, quoting at the same time the words put into Balaam's mouth by a certain French philosopher, “*Mon âne parle, et même il parle bien.*” Gertrude laughed, and vowed she could not dispute the merits of the last feature in the landscape; “but you might have that in the Highlands equally well,” she added.

“You wouldn't look half so nice as you do now,” objected the energetic peer, “not a bit of it! You'd be dressed in that hideous grey stuff, to begin with. Then you'd be on a shaggy brute of a pony, horribly disordered and *décoiffée* with what they call mountain breezes there, and *we* should term a gale of wind anywhere else. Also, such a hat as that wouldn't stand the climate a day. No, with these disadvantages, even you could not carry off the general gloom of the scene. Then think of those eternal tracts of moor. You are romantic, ladies always are, but you don't like sameness, ladies never do. Now, that's what I object to in grouse-shooting: the same scenery—the same objects, or rather the same want of objects—the same grey—the same brown—the same purple—the same blue. 'Pon my life, it's almost as bad as the sea. Yes, it's just one degree better than yachting. I appeal to both of you fellows, now, as men who are above prejudice. Were you not always the least thing bored with grouse-shooting by the end of the third day?”

“But then we hadn't Gertrude with us,” said Gilbert; whereat I remarked one gentleman of the party wince ever such a little, though his dark face varied not at all. I think she observed it too, for she addressed him for the first time.

“I hear you have been shooting very well, Mr. Gordon. I hope *you* like West Acres better than Scotland?”

One moment the whole iron face softened, till its expression was almost beautiful; the next, the mask was on again as tight as ever.

“Even without the foreground,” he answered, very low, and with a cold distant bow that was almost rude.

The others had gone to resume their guns, and I was getting out of the carriage, so I think she fancied the whisper was unobserved in which she replied, “Thank you for the

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compliment; you are sincere, at anyrate." And I am sure no one but myself heard John's muttered, "God help me! I *am*," with which he strode over the fence into the adjoining field.

Lady Gertrude drove off for the railway station at a pace of unusual liberality, and John Gordon missed the first three consecutive shots which offered themselves, to the astonishment and disgust of the keeper at his side.

I walked behind the sportsmen, enjoying the freshness of the air and the contemplation of a pastime that I had followed in youth with passionate eagerness. When a man has once cared for field-sports, I confess I am always sorry to see him losing his taste for these manly pursuits. I mean, when they come in his way naturally and easily. I have remarked that it argues either failing energy or too great a preponderance of one engrossing idea, than which nothing is more fatal to the *morale* of the individual. I believe balance to be one of the great secrets for preserving a well-regulated mind. One who can interest and occupy himself with what are called trifles, has a great advantage over another who must be at high pressure, so to speak, to work at all. The former can keep his faculties in edge and polish by frequent and judicious use; the latter must wear them away with too much friction, or leave them to lie on the shelf and rust.

As I watched Gilbert, I was concerned to see the listlessness of his bearing, and his mere endurance of what used to be one of his keenest pleasures. He was such a contrast to his two companions; for Holyhead, it is needless to observe, was an enthusiastic sportsman, while John Gordon, though never to be betrayed into anything like undue triumph or excitement, had still a strong zest for any task which required the slightest amount of skill or perseverance, and consistently carried out the precept of Solomon, "Whatsoever thine hand findeth to do, that do with thy might."

Nevertheless, field after field was beat; covey after covey, flushed, marked, broken, and destroyed. John Gordon had recovered his equanimity and the accuracy of his practice. Holyhead was beginning to complain of "that deathless thirst of his." There were fifty-two brace in the bag; the dews were falling rapidly, and a vapoury haze was rising from the teeming soil. Heavy banks of clouds tipped with crimson were settling over the western sky; the partridges were calling to each other from stubble to stubble; and even the keeper thought it was time "to give out," as he termed it.

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The sportsmen handed their guns to their attendants, and striking into the highroad, made for the park. Gilbert remained behind to give a few directions as to the disposal of some game, and the other two walked on at a pace that seemed to me peculiarly unsuitable after a hard day's work. Perhaps each had some restless reason of his own for wishing to get back to the Hall. I also had an object to pursue. I had determined to obtain an hour's quiet conversation with my boy. We were soon strolling along between the high thick hedges, out of sight and earshot of all but the quiet hares and busy rabbits that stole out of the plantations to crop their dank evening meal.

Like many other pleasant vices, smoking has given me up for years. Nevertheless, on occasion I hold the composing weed to be of great assistance to those who would invite confidence or unbosom themselves of their sorrows. Gilbert smiled as he handed me a cigar. For several minutes we walked on and smoked without a word.

CHAPTER XLI

"A DAY THAT IS DEAD"

I WAS the first to break silence. "Gilbert," I said, "I fear I shall have to go soon. I can only spare time for a short visit. When shall I see you again? What are you going to do all the winter?"

I confess to the common weakness of humanity that shrinks from entering at once upon a painful subject. I know I am wrong, but I cannot help, as it were, putting forth my foot and testing the temperature of the bath, to withdraw it again shrinkingly, and prepare, not without a shiver, for another attempt, rather than souse in at once over head and ears, and come up with a glow. Therefore, I tried to lead Gilbert on to a confession by degrees.

He started as though I had touched upon some subject which even then occupied his mind.

"Go abroad, I think," he answered, with rather a disturbed look: "to Egypt, or South America, or any other warm climate. What does it matter? What can I do here?"

"Shall you not stay at West Acres," I resumed, "now you are settled here—at least till the end of the hunting season?"

He laughed bitterly, launching at once into the savage tone which was habitual now, which he never used formerly.

"And fulfil my duties, I suppose, in the station in which I am placed! Ride half-bred horses over this breakneck country, and come home in the dark to dine with a few respectable idiots who haven't an idea beyond the fat on my venison and the taste of my claret. Then once a week I should attend magistrates' meetings, and commit poor fellows to prison that I know are ten times better and honester men than myself! Thank you, my dear old friend. What a life you would chalk out for me!"

"I *am* an old friend," I said gravely, "and that is why I am talking to you now. Think how ninety-nine men out of every hundred would envy you your lot."

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As I spoke we met one of his own labourers returning from work. His tools hung in a basket behind him; his coarse clothes and gaiters were plastered with mud; his red handkerchief, limp with toil, was knotted loosely round his weather-beaten neck. The man was obviously tired and hungry and poor, yet while we passed him he wished us a kindly “Good-night,” and whistled cheerfully as he stepped out on his homeward way.

Gilbert pointed over his shoulder with the loading-rod in his hand.

“I would give everything I have,” he said, “willingly—oh! how willingly!—to whistle with as light a heart as that fellow, even for a day.”

There was something so utterly hopeless and spirit-broken in his tone that I could hold out no longer.

“My boy,” I said, “you are very, very unhappy. I have known it, I have seen it, for long. Such a grief as yours, hidden and cherished and brooded over, eats like a sore into the heart. Like a sore, too, it should be opened and fomented and encouraged to run freely till it drains itself away. Will you not confide in me? Will you not take counsel with me? I have known you from a child. I have watched over you all your life. Gilbert, I love you like a son.”

He took my arm and pressed it in his own kindly manner.

“If you know it,” he said, “it’s no use my telling you. But you are right, Uncle Edward, I need not mind acknowledging to you that I am very miserable. It cannot be unmanly to speak the truth; and if it be so, what need that matter to me? I have nothing to care for, nothing to hope for, on earth. You cannot conceive how I loathe the wealth and the position and the luxury by which people set such store. What can they do for me? How can they help me? They do but give me facilities for evil; and I rush into guilt, not blindly—that might be excusable—but wilfully, and with open eyes, knowing it cannot make me forget even for an hour! I sometimes wonder why are these things so. I begin to doubt wisdom and truth—above all, justice. Am I expiating crimes committed in a past state, of which I have no remembrance? Or am I punished for the venial follies of my youth, in which even now I can see but little harm? What is it I have done? or what is the object and intention of making me so unhappy? I try to look at the whole question with the eye of an unprejudiced observer; to be myself the unshrinking anatomist of my own moral being—

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to abstract my own identity from the sufferer, and watch the fibres quiver and the nerves thrill with calm scientific interest. You see I go rather deep into the thing," he added, with a painful attempt at levity, "and the only conclusion I arrive at is the somewhat inconclusive one—*cui bono?*"

"You do not take the right view of it," I argued. "How can you look dispassionately on your own sufferings? And when was cold philosophy sufficient to console a man for any sorrows but those of others? *Cui bono?* you ask. Did you ever hear of a prize without a struggle? Can you not conceive that the furnace must be heated sevenfold to temper the true steel? Gilbert, the time will come when you will thank God that you have been in trouble!"

"And you mean to tell me that all this is for my own good?" he broke in. "To put me off with the old woman's argument, that wretchedness here necessarily implies happiness hereafter. I dispute the whole principle. I maintain that if there is any scheme at all, man is intended to be happy both in this world and the next—that the very affections which constitute the blessings of earth fit him best for heaven. And what of him who is to lose both?—who feels as I do, too painfully, that he has been deprived in this life of that for which the next, whatever it may be, can offer him no equivalent? But on questions such as these no two people can agree. You have not felt as I have, Uncle Edward; I cannot expect you to think as I do."

I have always been of opinion that a grain of illustration is worth a pound of argument. We were still half an hour's walk from the hall. Evening had already closed in. Time and place were equally adapted for confidential communication.

"You doubt my experiences," I said; "would you like to hear something of them? You have known me as long as you have known anything. Do you ever remember me different from what I am now?"

He smiled as he answered—

"No. My impression of you from the first is the same kind, dear old Uncle Edward, with the same white hair, and the same absent ways, and I firmly believe the very same clothes that you have got on to-day."

"A sort of old man of the sea," I replied, "who clung to you so tight that you never could shake him off. I wonder you were not afraid of him as a child, that Ancient Mariner—

'So long, and lank, and brown,
As is the ribb'd sea sand.'

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Ah! Gilbert, I have never told you before; I will tell you now, almost in the Ancient Mariner's words—

‘ Oh ! wedding-guest this soul hath been
Alone on a wide, wide sea ;
So lonely 'twas, that God himself
Scarce seem'd there to be.’

The sea is lonely as ever, but it is not so wide now; and I think I know that God is often nearer poor Hagar in the wilderness than mocking Sarah smiling at the tent-door, surrounded by flocks and herds, asses and camels, and all the profusion of the Patriarch's wealth. Think of that desolate one as she sat down on the barren sand, a bowshot off from her child that she might not see him die. It was not till she had abandoned her very last hope that the spring bubbled up, and they were saved. Will you hear how it was with me before you were born?

“ It may seem strange to you that the quiet old book-worm whom you remember making your bows and arrows as a child, and reading Herodotus with you as a youth, should ever have been, like yourself, a man of the world, worldly, mixing in all the sports and vanities that are so engrossing at the time, and draining the cup of pleasure with a zest of which even the memory carries with it a species of intoxication still. He was rich, gay, agreeable—he may say so now without vanity—and above all, thoroughly in earnest. Whatever promised amusement or excitement, he pursued and ran down with unfailing energy. Ay, it's no use disguising it, you know it as well as I do—pleasure, empty though it be, is a very pleasant thing while it lasts. We have read of the Cups of Circe, you and I, in the old peaceful days. Depend upon it, they were no insipid draught. Cold, sweet, and sparkling, be sure they never lost their flavour till they had produced their effect. Ah! with the strength and skill of manhood in one's limbs, and the hot blood of manhood boiling at one's heart, it was no tame pastime to sweep along on a high-couraged hunter over fence and field, racing with half a dozen of the wildest and merriest of one's friends; no wearisome task to watch far into the night, quaffing the blushing claret, with thick-coming fancies crowding in the brain on the generous flood, and the charms of wit, and friendship, and poetry, and romance, brought out as the varnish brings out the colours of a picture, in each of the brave, thoughtless, high-spirited comrades who sat around. Why need I dwell on all that life offers to the rich and gay?—the succession of sports, the crowded racecourse with its

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rush of horses, its Babel of tongues, and its flower-show of beauty; the solitary heather-bed amongst the dark hills that lower round Ben-y-Glo; the wild wave surging up so fresh and free from the bows of the gliding cutter, steadying bravely to the breeze; above all, the pleasant voices of women, the ringing laugh, the merry eye, and the intoxicating smile. You have done it all; you have tried it all. You have been through the charmed circle; you cannot deny it. It was a gleaming fairyland once, for all it is such a waste of desert now. Well, Gilbert, I have trodden the same path before you; I am ashamed to think how well I liked it. But the time came at last when I began to deem all this sparkle and glitter less the end than the accessories of existence; when I esteemed such but as the stones of lesser price, that I would fain group around the pearl I thought I had won; nay, when I flung them away willingly, cheerfully, that the pearl might show fairer, purer, without the aid of extraneous ornament. Then I said, I have found the philosopher's stone at last. What need I care that I melt all my possessions in the crucible, since I have worked out the charm that turns everything to gold? Why should I grudge to abstract myself from all I have hitherto esteemed, and give up friends, ambition, fame, station, all and everything, since I have discovered the pearl of great price, which, when a man finds, he sells all he has that he may make it his own? I was *really* happy now—so I thought, and so I was—for about half a day! It is no less sad than true, Gilbert; and you will, I feel, agree with me, that this false glamour is a warmer, softer light than the pure, clear dawn of the true day. Alas! instead of growing brighter and brighter into the splendour of noon, that it should fade as rapidly as a meteor, and leave us in a darkness all the more profound that our eyes have been dazzled, and our senses stupefied with its sheen!

“I set my pearl in gold, if ever man did. The gem was well worthy of the setting. I am an old man now. Boy! I cannot but be within a few paces of my grave. Years have gone by since then; years that have changed everything around me. And yet I dare not speak to-day of the great sorrow that passed over me and left me desolate.

“Do you think I cared for worldly ruin after that? Do you think the choicest gifts of fortune could have ever again been to me aught but dust and ashes? The greatest kindness you can bestow on the poor wretch who has taken his death-wound, is to lay him down in some quiet corner unnoticed and alone.

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“These things are managed for us. It must be so, or the memories of threescore years and ten would drive a good man mad. Let me look calmly back down the long valley, and think of what might have been. Had I retained all the treasures men most covet—health, and wealth, and strength, and station—ay, and the one inestimable blessing that alone made them all worth having—how could I have borne to think of death? Too happy for a mortal, I must have become a coward from sheer fulness of content. Again, had I not been compelled to face actual want alone, how would it have racked my heart to see her in poverty and distress! On the other hand, to have lost the jewel and preserved the setting, would have been to sit with folded hands in the mute prostration of despair. But when all was lost, then was it all was gained. It is well to have but one Friend left, the only Friend that never failed a man at his need. There He is, always the same, always generous, always sympathising, always forgiving; not grudging that you never come to Him till everyone else has spurned you; accepting your broken heart all the more kindly that it is broken and humbled to the dust. Oh, my boy, if the heathen thought he was sure of one last resource in death, what courage does it give us to know that we have our refuge in life for ever!”

Gilbert shook his head. He was dissatisfied still. How I wished for the tongue of men and angels to win him over to my side! But there was a drop of bitterness in his heart that turned all his better feelings to gall.

“Yours is a sad story,” he said, “but I daresay there are many such in the world, though few have borne the load so gently and bravely as my old friend. Do not think, however, that it is any consolation to me to lament and whine over so common an infliction as mine. On the contrary, I wish, as I have already told you, to look on the whole thing as a physiological study. It is rather amusing than otherwise. You know the facts; I need not go over them. You know what I felt for her. O God! you know how I loved her!” (it was sad how his voice changed;) “and by this time you must know the return she has made me for all I could give. The thing is almost absurd enough to stand for a joke. If the devil ever laughs—and I am sure he must often have cause—it is enough to make him hold his sides. Well may he gibe and jeer at those who do his work without even receiving his wages. I laugh at it myself, when I am alone. And yet what would I not have sacrificed—what did I not sacrifice for her? I asked for so little in return. Had she but loved me

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I should have lived all my life true and self-denying for her sake. I would not even have asked to see her, or be near her; but I would have heard from time to time of her welfare, and so toiled on, hoping to meet her in another world. Is this high and holy affection, or is it stark madness? What has been my reward? She drops me with as little effort as it takes to pull off a pair of soiled gloves, and when I am dying she never comes near me to know how I am!"

He spoke with a degree of bitterness that was painful to hear. It was clear he knew nothing of Ada's visit to his sick-chamber. My gentle, soft-hearted Ada, who would have given her life only too happily to have saved his—it seemed cruel he should so misunderstand her. After a moment's silence he went on again.

"This it is that galls me so; I can sometimes hardly endure it. This it is that makes me a morose, and savage, and miserable man. I could have borne anything better than this. Rather would I have lost her a thousand times, than feel that she is so unworthy, that I have been wasting my whole being on a myth, on an idea, on that which never had an existence; that the Ada whom I worshipped so fondly was false, heartless, fickle, and unfeeling as the veriest coquette that ever sold herself for the miserable triumph of a day!"

I could bear it no longer. To hear her so misjudged, so reviled, and by him of all men on earth!

"Hold, Gilbert," I said; "had you seen her as I did, when you were insensible in London, and she came to take her last look of you on earth, you would not speak of her as you do now."

Fool that I was, I had better have bit my tongue out by the roots, than have let him guess at the reality of that touching interview. He seized me by the arm, and looked wildly into my face. "Did she come to me?" he said, in a low choking voice; "O God! she loves me still!"

We were entering the house while he spoke. He hurried away with staggering, uncertain steps, and I heard the lock of his door turned when he reached his room.

CHAPTER XLII

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INNER that day was rather a tedious affair. Our host did not appear; nor was this an unusual practice with Gilbert of late,—the very fine gentleman who condescended to officiate as groom of the chambers, and who was chiefly remarkable for the elegance with which he turned his periods, and the perseverance with which he pulled down his wristbands, announcing to us that “Mr. Orme begged we would not wait. He had given orders not to be disturbed. Mr. Orme had a large

amount of business to transact against post-time.” So we paired off and rustled into dinner without him.

Bella seemed the liveliest of the party. Lady Gertrude, I could not but observe, was exceedingly uneasy; and John Gordon very much out of spirits and out of humour. Lady Olivia was disturbed about some shortcomings of her maid. Holyhead was quieter and more subdued than his wont, though still by no means a dull companion; and I myself, I must confess, felt oppressed by many vague and painful misgivings which I should have been at a loss to explain.

Miss Jones, however, was quite lively and talkative. This young lady was considerably improved by the misfortunes through which she had passed. Her somewhat hoydenish manner had acquired repose and dignity, without losing its frankness. Her tone was softened, and her bearing more self-restrained. She was a woman now; and one who had not only learned to depend on herself, but to act for others. Even her very appearance was changed, and to my thinking, vastly for the better. She had lost the *beauté de diable*, the only beauty, by the way, to which she could lay claim; but she had gained in its stead a depth of expression, and a defined

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characteristic cast of countenance, well worth all the red-and-white in the world. I do not think I was the only person present of this opinion.

I do not set up, like many gentlemen of my age and habits, for a consummate judge of beauty. It is perhaps a subject on which study is by no means beneficial, and even in theory admits of every variety of taste and opinion. I do know one man, and that by no means an impressionable person, on whom an impediment in the female speech (doubtless a rare defect, and not without its advantages) produces instantaneous subjection. Stoically uninfluenced by regularity of features, adamant to complexion and crinoline, his defences fall to the abortive music of a stutter, as the walls of Jericho crumbled at the trumpet-blast of the hosts of Israel. He is fascinated, conquered, bound hand and foot, before the fair mute can get out her offer of quarter. The one hesitates, and the other is lost. I only adduce this in corroboration of a proverb which exists in every known language, to the effect that there is no accounting for tastes.

To my mind, our young English ladies are very tardy in reaching their prime. They do not usually get rid of their baby-faces till person and intellect have for some years arrived at the stage of womanhood; and beautiful as those baby-faces unquestionably are, I think most men will admit that time and experience, while altering their expression, rather add to than detract from their charms. In the south of Europe, twenty-five or thirty is synonymous with decay. A Transatlantic beauty is in the splendour of her prime at eighteen. Our Saxon cousins, with their fair hair and blue eyes, commonly grow so fat in their sixth lustre, as to lose all pretensions to admiration: whilst a Frenchwoman's teeth rarely withstand the influence of the *bonbonnière* for half a dozen years after her marriage. It is only our English dames, I think, who, thanks to their climate, constitution, food, and habits, preserve their beauty unimpaired up to the very verge of middle age. Bella was yet a long way from that somewhat uncertain period; nevertheless she was acquiring expression of countenance and fascination of manner day by day. She was quite capable now of taking her part in the emptiest conversation—than which I hold no accomplishment more denotes familiarity with society—and brought us down the very latest London gossip, which at the end of September, it is fair to conclude, was more likely to originate at Brighton than in the deserted city itself.

“Mrs. Montpellier was at the old Steine. Mrs. Mont-

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pellier had called upon her. She had a piece of news especially for Lord Holyhead—Mrs. Montpellier had refused Charley Wing.”

Holyhead looked excessively conscious, though doubtless everyone present mistook the cause.

“How very strange!” said he, with a forced laugh. “Such a *parti* for a widow! You know Charley is smothered in money now. What can she be about? She must be waiting for a Rothschild?”

“I don’t think Mr. Wing can be very rich,” observed Bella. “I saw him one day walking on the Chain Pier in such shabby clothes, and with a cotton umbrella!”

“That’s a sure proof of wealth,” remarked John Gordon. “Capitalists always carry cotton umbrellas; I know it’s so in the City. A very neat article, we consider, looks like borrowing money. I speak as a professional man.”

We laughed; and I remarked a smile on the staid countenance of the groom of the chambers, *ex officio* a close observer of men and manners.

“He’s very good-looking,” said Miss Jones simply, still harping on Charley Wing; “if he would only dress himself a little better; but I suppose Mrs. Montpellier don’t think so.”

“Is that really your opinion?” asked Lord Holyhead uneasily; then added, with his frank laugh, “Ah, Miss Jones, you should have seen him in his palmy days, when he hadn’t a sixpence. He was the smartest and best-looking fellow about London then.”

“Gilbert used always to call him the Last of the Lady-Killers,” remarked Gertrude. “How amused he will be to hear of his rebuff! I have often heard him declare he should be more afraid of Charley Wing as a rival than anybody in the world.”

“He mustn’t say so again,” interposed Holyhead mischievously. “I believe it is nobody *but* Gilbert that has cut out Charley with Mrs. Montpellier.”

“What nonsense! Gilbert never thought of her!” exclaimed Lady Gertrude, with flashing eyes and uncalled-for energy. “I mean,” she added, calming suddenly down as if a little ashamed of her vehemence, “it is so hard that people never can be friends without the world putting the most uncharitable constructions.”

Her ladyship’s unqualified denial did not fail to produce its effect. The servants looked startled; Lady Olivia displeased; Holyhead amused; and John Gordon’s brow grew darker and darker. When the ladies rose *en masse* to take

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flight, he did not even stoop to pick up the gloves and handkerchief which Gertrude had of course suffered to escape below the table. I was forced to dive for them myself, no easy task for an old man after dinner ; and though she thanked me kindly for the recovery of these superfluities, I do not think she was conscious of a syllable she said.

Soon after her departure, John thought proper to repeat his previously announced intention of starting by the early train next morning. Holyhead suddenly sank into a very unusual fit of abstraction, in which he not only forgot to pass the bottle, but neglected to fill his own glass. The consumption of claret was moderate in the extreme ; and the bell that summoned coffee was felt to be a relief to all.

In the drawing-room matters were even worse. Lady Olivia had gone to bed with a headache—the only indisposition to which her strong organisation was subject, and which was apt to come on when she was tired of her company. Gertrude, looking extremely restless and anxious, had taken a cup of tea to Gilbert's door. Miss Jones chatted on pleasantly enough for a time, chiefly to the edification of Lord Holyhead, who seemed never tired of asking news about her papa, her cottage, her parrot, and her pianoforte. On the three former topics they were growing quite confidential. She had told him that papa was getting better every day, and was a different man since he had escaped from the constant annoyances and anxieties of business ; that he got his rubber four nights a week ; and that she herself played "double dummy" with him the other two. That the little house was very comfortable. She even described the situation of the rooms, and the pattern of the drawing-room carpet. That the parrot liked his new quarters as well as the rest of the family, and had "quite left off biting people," added Bella, with a blush and a smile. And then she checked his lordship's explosions of hilarity, and his assurances that he should bear the scars to his grave, by an allusion to the comfort she had derived from the possession of the pianoforte at the worst stage of their misfortunes, and her gratitude for the kindness and forethought which had provided her with the instrument.

"I never found out," said Bella, in a much lower and rather unsteady voice, "whose gift it was till John told me about it at Brighton. I had almost made up my mind to write and thank you, but I thought I had better wait till I should see you to express my gratitude ; and now I hardly know how to do so strongly enough. It was very, very kind of you, Lord Holyhead," said Bella, and the black eyes filled with tears,

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though she tried hard to smile. "You must be a conjurer. You must have known exactly what I wanted, or you must have taken a great deal of trouble to find out."

"I have thought of little else for many months," he whispered, in a very low voice, not much steadier than her own; and I confess at this juncture I began to consider whether a third person must not be rather in the way. Gertrude had not returned from her mission with the tea. Gordon was in the little drawing-room, as it was called, obviously reading the paper, to judge by the irritable crackling of the broadsheet. Besides myself, these two were the only inhabitants of the apartment, and they seemed to be quite forgetful of my presence, so engrossed were they with the absorbing topic which someone has described as "talking *to* each other *of* each other." Old gentlemen are all very well in their way, but if they are dense and inconsiderate they may sometimes be very much in the way of other people. I began to think I had better penetrate into the library; that was my natural sphere now. There was not much temptation to remain with John Gordon in the retreat he had selected, and I caught myself repeating the *Me nec femina nec puer* of Horace as I sat me down to a stiffish page of Diodorus Siculus which had long puzzled me, but of which that evening I certainly failed to extract the meaning.

No! I do not think I would have it all over again if I could. *Otium divos rogat in patienti*—how that Horace keeps running in my head! but surely rest, rest is what poor mortality must yearn for, after all. It is better to lie still, though it be down fathom-deep below the dark waters, than to be ever heaving to and fro, the sport of the changing wave. No more fair breezes and smiling skies and purple islands studding the smooth sheen of the tropic sea; but then no more treacherous fogs and hidden reefs and sudden squalls and long-continued gales to baffle the bold mariner, and vex and weary and make him long for any port at last. No more joyous chorus round the capstan, nor pleasant carouse with jolly messmates on Saturday nights; but then no more turning up all hands to shorten sail in the night, with the sea washing heavily over the slippery deck, and the bare spars dancing and reeling aloft against the cheerless, windy, starry sky. The mariner is down in the sea caves, wrapped in his clean hammock, with a round-shot at his feet. There let him sleep sound and still till the resurrection. He is better so.

Once it crossed my mind, as I turned over the pages of Diodorus Siculus, that a lady of whom I had heard as the

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Signora Bravoura might be somewhat dissatisfied with the arrangements so obviously impending. How that strong-minded vocalist herself, or any of her fashionable friends, would have laughed at my being so much behindhand in the gossip of the world. They had parted months ago; and from what I have heard of the lady, it was by no means the least courageous act of his lordship's life thus to free himself from a captivity that was growing more hopeless day by day.

With all the intuitive tact and administrative powers of the female intellect, there are some characters of the other sex, and those not the least capable, in the management of which women find themselves completely at fault. To sooth the hasty, to cajole the obstinate, to flatter and impose upon the vain, or with honeyed accents and specious eloquence to mystify the weak, what advocate so successful as a woman? But there is one class of disposition she usually mistakes, which baffles her persuasive powers, and before which her boasted influence is swept away like a mesh of cobwebs. It is that of a frank, good-humoured, single-hearted, yet resolute man. His very absence of cunning foils all her tactics. He cannot be made to understand her hidden interpretations—her tortuous schemes—her pretty little affectations and harmless duplicity; the shaft that would sting a more artificial heart to the quick, rebounds innocuous from the stainless shield of innocence. There can be no trial of fence where one declines to use the small sword, and falsehood, with all its speed, has so much lost ground continually to make up, that it can never reach the goal so soon as truth. Beaten from her usual mode of warfare by such an opponent, the fair aggressor is prone to mistake forbearance for weakness, and patience for stupidity. Then she falls into a fatal error, and elects to try the issue by sheer strength. He has borne a good deal. He will bear just a little—ever such a little—more. You are bad handicappers, ladies! Ask your brothers or your husbands if it is not that last pound which turns the triumph of Newmarket to a defeat none the less ruinous that it was within a yard of victory? Be advised by me. If you have half reclaimed your falcon, be careful how you abuse the obedience of that tameless nature. Ruffle its feathers but once too often, and the bird breaks away from wrist and jesses, never to stoop to the lure again.

Bravoura was a lady of considerable physical calibre—deep-bosomed as Juno, ox-eyed also like the mother of the gods, and, not to speak it disrespectfully, a little bull-throated. The price of stalls and boxes on her benefit nights sufficiently

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vouched for the power of her lungs, and her servants and courier could answer for her high courage and temper to correspond. She feared nobody on earth but Holyhead, and she tried to bully *him*. The obvious result of such a measure was to be found in his lordship's happy escape from thralldom, which left him at liberty to tell Bella Jones such a tale in the quiet drawing-room at West Acres, as called up blushes, but not of shame, on her comely cheek, and tears, but not of sorrow, into her downcast eyes.

"They will suit each other remarkably well," was the way in which I translated a page of the vellum-covered volume on my knee; "better than nine couples out of ten. She loves him dearly, and she will make him the most willing of wives. He is the last person on earth to exact obedience except in a case of absolute necessity, and then, unless I mistake him very much, he is a man who will not be denied. I believe such make the best husbands. Moreover he is a widower, and Bella will gain hugely by comparison with his late viscountess, a lady with whom I had the disadvantage of being acquainted. She has at least this in her favour, that her rival will not be that imaginary piece of perfection who is supposed to be endowed with all those charms proverbially to be found only in 'bachelors' wives.' Holyhead's, again, is not a nature that can love anything a little, and for a short time. He is old enough to know his own mind, and he seems pretty sure of it on this occasion. It will be a cheerful wedding, with more smiles than tears. Then they will go away to the old place in Yorkshire, and the school-children will cheer them under arches of laurels, and the tenants will get drunk, and the bonny bride receive a hearty welcome home. Holyhead will live there entirely, and farm a little, and hunt and shoot a good deal, and put on a stone of weight every year; and Bella will expand into a comely matron, with a fine numerous family, a blessing to the poor, an acquisition to the neighbourhood, and the very prop and mainstay of the annual York Ball."

I thought of the altar rails, and the grave priest, and the touching blessing—"Well is thee, and happy shalt thou be!" Then I thought—how could I but think?—of one in that very house, its lord and master, sitting apart from all in his own room, alone with his desolate heart. I could feel for him looking blankly into the future—no promise for him in the coming years—no hope of that to which almost all men who hope at all, look forward at some time or another—a happy home. It is bad enough to think of the journey through the

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Great Sahara when it is nearly over ; but who, with the weary ride fresh in his remembrance, the aching eyes, the dizzying glare, the endless caravan, the tiresome bell, the cruel thirst, the maddening sameness day by day—who, I say, in sight of the palm-trees and minarets at last, but would pity one whom he knew to be mounting his patient camel to commence the self-same pilgrimage? Alas for Gilbert! I could hardly bear to think of him. Unconsciously as I rose from my chair and paced up and down the long library, my glance rested on the portrait of Frank Orme. In the dim light those eager eyes looked startlingly out of the canvas into my own. I began to understand Lady Gertrude's youthful dislike to the picture. For the first time I acknowledged to its full extent the wild fascination of that handsome face. There was a spell upon me that seemed to affect my nerves and my brain. The eyes haunted me, the more painfully, too, that I avoided them and turned my back on the figure. Whilst in my ears something seemed continually to whisper, "To our next merry meeting! To our next merry meeting!"

CHAPTER XLIII

WON'T YOU?

THE evening in question was an eventful one at West Acres. As we read that before the Deluge people feasted and amused themselves, and married and were given in marriage, not discontinuing such indulgences even after the rain began to fall, and the avenging waters to mount inch by inch from the sea—so we of modern times must dine and dress, and make love and conversation, whatever may be impending on ourselves individually, or those who are nearest and dearest to our affections. If you or I were to die to-morrow, kind reader, our survivors must eat and drink. The butler would fill their glasses with sherry as usual, perhaps a trifle fuller if a feeling man; and should the fish not be boiled enough, do not suppose the cook's shortcomings would escape notice on account of our demise. Is there one heart in the world, think you, that will break when you are gone? Perhaps there may be just one. If so, thank God that you have really lived, and grudge not to depart when you are called "home, to go and take your wages."

There were several agitated minds above-stairs in Mr. Orme's house when the servants' supper-bell rang. Not the least so, though he tamed and kept it under with his iron will, was that of Mr. John Gordon, reading the *Western Luminary* upside down in the little drawing-room, and deriving obvious stores of information from the well-filled columns of that meritorious journal. John was very discontented and unhappy. He had miscalculated his strength—he, who never miscalculated anything, and who piqued himself so especially on that same godlike quality of strength. He had thought he was quite man enough to come down to West Acres for a week and enjoy his shooting, and be as happy as he had always been in Gilbert's society; and if anything decided should take place whilst he was there, why, that he could congratulate the cousins with a steady voice and an unruffled brow. Love is blind indeed. John saw clearly, though

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nobody else did, that Lady Gertrude was on the eve of becoming mistress of West Acres. And now to-day he had found out that he couldn't bear it. He felt hurt and angry; he had spoken unkindly, bitterly, almost rudely. She must have remarked it; everybody must have heard it; he would not run such another risk of losing his self-control. He would go away to-morrow morning and *never see her again*.

Do you remember the magic mirror on which Cornelius called up for gifted Surrey the image of his love? Do you think she ever looked so fair to him in the reality of daylight at home, as far away in that foreign land, under "the vaulted roof of gramarye"? Did his heart ever thrill to her fondest whisper when he sat by her at the banquet, or led her a stately measure through the hall, as it thrilled to mark her image in the depths of that dreamy picture?—where the dear one

"Lay reclined,
And pensive, read from tablet eburnine
Some strain that seem'd her inmost soul to find;
That favour'd strain was Surrey's raptur'd line,
That fair and lovely form, the Lady Geraldine."

What was the secret of the wizard's charm but the desolate feeling—he would never see her again? Those are the words, that is the spell to call up at an instant the image of the loved one, in its brightest beauty and its dearest perfections. Then we feel the worth of all that we have lost; then we reproach ourselves that we did not value it half enough while it was our own; then we know that henceforth the mirror must be broken and the self-emitted light be quenched for evermore.

John Gordon ran over his whole past life in his mind. He recalled the delicate high-born girl on whom he had dared so long ago to set his heart: a thousand graces of voice and manner, a thousand bright looks and kindly words, beamed on his memory once more. He remembered—oh! so well—the first happy day on which the possibility had dawned upon him of winning her at last. What strength and energy had that hope given him for the battle of life! How had he risen in his own esteem for the courage that owned so high an aim, and the determination, which he felt he possessed, that could alone conquer the difficulties in his path! What labour, what efforts, what self-denial had he shrunk from while there was yet a hope? Had he ever miscalculated an advantage or thrown a chance away with this one object in view? He

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had submitted to drudgery, to confinement, to a career of endless and continuous labour, because these were the only steps to advance him on his way. He had consented to be thought avaricious, grovelling, ungenerous, for his relentless pursuit of wealth. And why? Because the bars of the ladder must be made of gold. Why had he winced so painfully from the news of his partner's difficulties, and gone out at once to Sydney, making light of danger, trouble and hardship, but that he might leave no means untried to refit the dismantled barque that carried all *his* venture? He remembered so vividly her farewell in Portland Place—the turn of her head, the colour of her dress, the very gloves she wore. He had been angry with her then. Ah! he was not angry with her now. Then he recalled her greeting when he returned, and the sense of honour which enforced him to silence whilst his heart was bursting to speak. Surely she cared for him then. Perhaps he, too, like others, had learned to agree with Dante—to acknowledge,

“This is truth the poet sings,
That a sorrow's crown of sorrow is remembering happier things.”

Well, well; it was no use looking back. Of course she was meant for Gilbert from the first, and he ought to have known it long ago. He hoped she would be happy with her cousin; he would always hope that. For him the dream was over. It had lasted through the best years of his life. He was no lovesick swain, yet something told him that it would be a darker world henceforth; that was not her fault, but his own weakness. He was not ashamed of it. “After all,” thought John, “I have been a better and a kindlier man for her sake.”

Some work of Gertrude's lay on the table at his elbow. She was no persevering sempstress at the best of times, and it was her habit to do a few desultory stitches at a sitting, and leave her embroidery about in an untidy and disorderly manner. By an impulse very unusual in one of his disposition, he took it up and pressed it fervently to his lips. Gertrude, passing softly along the corridor, on her way to the drawing-room, saw the gesture through the open door, and drew her own conclusions, to her own entire satisfaction.

Now this young lady, albeit neither given to nerves nor *migraine*, but rejoicing, on the contrary, in a character and constitution of more than ordinary vigour, was nevertheless to-night in a disturbed and restless frame of mind, from a

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variety of conflicting causes. The origin of her distress, she persuaded herself, was anxiety on Gilbert's behalf; and her cousin's seclusion in his own room doubtless caused her no inconsiderable uneasiness. She had been to visit him after dinner with a cup of tea, and finding the door locked, had left it there to cool in the passage, and so betook herself to her own room, there to weep a little, and bathe her eyes, and smooth her hair, and shake out her muslin skirts, ere she returned to the drawing-room more radiant than she quitted it.

Now there was no occasion for passing the door of the apartment in which we left Mr. Gordon reading the *Western Luminary*, to proceed from Lady Gertrude's chamber to the principal drawing-room, whither she was bound. Such a course, on the contrary, from the plan of the house, involved the transit of several passages, and no less than three green baize doors. We can only conclude, therefore, that Lady Gertrude must have had some unexplained motive for traversing so much unnecessary space. On this subject, as our business lies chiefly with results, we need not trouble ourselves to speculate.

It was one thing, however, to have a sly peep at John Gordon—a sort of farewell look on which to dwell to-morrow when he was gone, and so depart unseen—and another to witness the very ridiculous pantomime which I have ventured to describe. Lady Gertrude was not a person to deliberate when the moment of action had arrived; she was thoroughly versed, moreover, in the character with which she had to deal. Had she not studied it for months, thinking of little else? She knew intuitively that if he went away to-morrow he would never come back again.

"Now or never!" thought her ladyship, and she walked into the room with a bold front indeed, but with quaking limbs and a beating heart.

"Are you studying *cross-stitch*, Mr. Gordon?" said she, with an artificial laugh that would not have deceived a baby.

John dropped the work as if it had burnt his fingers, stood up, sat down again, and looked like a fool.

His embarrassment gave her courage; she could afford to banter him if he was really at her mercy.

"I should have thought you required no lessons in *that*," she proceeded, crossing her taper forefingers in close proximity to his face. "You are going away at a moment's notice; you have scarcely spoken a word since you have been here.



"The strong arm was round her at last"

WON'T YOU?

Aunt Olivia thought you very much altered. Do you wish to quarrel with all your old friends?"

Her antagonist's, we need hardly say, was an honest, manly nature. It was no time now for fencing and trifling, saying one thing and meaning another the while. He was disarmed, and, like a brave man, not ashamed to confess it. The stern face softened as she had seen it soften once or twice before, and the voice in which he spoke was very kind and tender in its grave sorrow—

"I will never quarrel with you, Gertrude. I have been learning a hard lesson; I am not quite perfect in it yet. God bless you! I shall not see you again to wish you good-bye. I go early to-morrow."

"Why?" she asked, glancing uneasily at him. She could not trust her voice to add another syllable.

"I will not grudge you your triumph," he answered, still in those grave, kind tones. "It is soon said. Once, Lady Gertrude, I was fool enough to hope I might some day win you. Now it is only right I should pay the penalty of my presumption. Listen. For a good many years I tried to build up a fortune, that I might ask you to share it. Even then I think I should have been prepared for a refusal; but at least I could have come boldly forward and made my offer. All that is impossible now. You are generous, Lady Gertrude, this avowal will not deprive me of your friendship! It is for my own sake that I ask not to meet you very often, for even a man like me has his defenceless points. I must go back to work now after my holiday. You know I am poor."

"But I am rich," exclaimed Gertrude hastily; and then crimsoning to her temples, rested her arms on the chimney-piece and hid her face in her hands.

I believe, though, she peeped at him through her fingers, for she must have been aware of the struggle that tore that brave heart, and convulsed the well-known face, usually so staid and composed, or she never could have found courage to make the following remarkable little speech, spoken very low, and in accents of breathless rapidity—

"Don't be so proud! Will you not ask me to share with you all I have in the world?"

The strong arm was round her at last. She buried her face on the broad, true breast. And then, having succeeded in getting what most she wanted on earth, of course she set to work, and cried as if her heart would break.

So the lady proposed to the gentleman, after all! How

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shocking, how incorrect, how unfeminine! Quite a reversal of the established order of things. And yet, if my married friends will take the trouble to recall the most thrilling moments of their lives, they will perhaps agree with me that, virtually at least, such trespasses on the privilege of leap-year are neither wholly inexcusable nor quite so rare as is usually supposed.

CHAPTER XLIV

THE HUSBAND

IF you will take the trouble to consult the terrestrial globe in your library, and are not too much puzzled by the brass meridian, called by courtesy of Greenwich, which girds the same, you will, if I mistake not, find certain colonial districts of Australia as nearly as possible the direct antipodes to our own country. If you are also a believer in those theories regarding the solar system, which are considered the most plausible in the present century, you will hardly dispute the position that nine o'clock in the evening at West Acres was nine in the morning at Sydney. I have endeavoured, partly from my own observation, partly from matters that have since come to my knowledge, to describe what was occurring in one of "the quiet homes of England" at this particular hour. I wish I could bring before you a scene that was being enacted almost at the same moment on the opposite side of the world.

I should be sorry to ask my reader to wade with me through the coarse details that make up the life of such a man as William Latimer. One who has, to use the common expression, seen better days, and who with his lost position has also lost the self-respect which depended alone on extraneous circumstances, is apt, I imagine, to sink into a lower depth of degradation than the more ignorant and, so to speak, natural blackguard. The man has glimpses of what he was, and what he might have been, which madden, while they drive him to despair. He cannot rise to anything better, he knows full well, because he has shut the door upon himself; he cannot fall, he thinks, to anything worse than a disgraced and branded object. So he lives for the passing moment. He is vicious, because he has lost the only two moral checks to vice—hope and self-respect. He is idle, because who would be fool enough to work, save with a view of improving his position? He is pitiless, because none, he thinks, would help or pity him; and he feels at last a

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morbid triumph in making himself really as bad as he is thought.

Since Gilbert took leave of Ada's husband at Sydney, after that meeting in the wild Australian bush, which was to the one but a pleasant episode in a life of continual change, to the other a sudden destruction of his whole future, Latimer had been following out the same career of speculation and debauchery which had first driven him from England, and then ruined him in the colony; yet which, to such a mind as his, was not without its charms. Yes, there is a pleasure in excitement—there is a pleasure in dissipation—there is a pleasure in vice—that is the worst of it. But what a price we pay for them, even in ready money, here! What a reversion we sell for them hereafter!

Latimer had thought of reforming over and over again, but he knew full well that, however much he might talk about it in his softer moments, there were many reasons to prevent his return to England. Even in the colony he was now too well known to occupy a respectable position. His only chance was to make one large successful speculation, and then with the profits, or rather the plunder, to seek a fresh home in the United States, or perhaps some of the lawless republics of Central America. Should he send for Ada to join him? This was a measure he had often debated in his own mind. He never seemed for a moment to question her willingness to come. Altogether he was persuaded he could do better without her. He wished he was rid of her—he wished she was free and independent of him. Every time he looked at her bracelet he seemed more and more to have forgotten the donor. Yet he kept the trinket too. He liked to think sometimes that he could not always have been so *very* bad, or she would not have given him this remembrance. But he had formed and broken so many ties since then, he had simply almost forgotten her. Latimer was one of those men on whom a barmaid *in presenti* makes more impression than an absent Madonna. What would you have? There are many such. I have often thought these are the dispositions women like best? He had written a second letter to his wife, postponing his promised return to England, but telling her where he was to be found. He now considered whether he should not send her a third, expressing his intentions of never troubling her again, and bidding her a final farewell. He was waiting before he despatched so conclusive a missive to accompany it with a round sum of money, thus salving, as it were, his own conscience, and

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persuading himself he was doing rather a generous action after all. He must indeed have quite forgotten Ada when he meditated such a proceeding as this.

It is no easy task, however, to get hold of that same round sum of money, which is not only as slippery as ice, but melts like that substance in the grasp. When he was sober, Latimer was doubtless a shrewd, observant man, not without considerable aptitude for business, and that readiness to embark on fresh schemes, profitable in proportion to their risk, which often in a new country leads to considerable success. But we must take leave to mistrust all these rapid methods of growing rich. Cent. per cent. is a tempting return, doubtless; but undertakings which promise so largely are apt to swallow up the capital before the interest is paid, and the speculator has nothing left of his venture but the satisfaction of knowing that while five hundred pounds more would have made his fortune, the present amount of his assets is easily represented by a round O.

So Latimer went into one thing after another, with untiring energy, indeed, but varied success. One day he had put by an overplus, and saw his way clearly to independence; the next he kicked it all down again in trying to double it too hastily. He was ever looking forward to a to-morrow that should enable him to send home a certain sum, and what he called wind up his affairs; but that to-morrow never came. Such courses could not but tell upon his health and habits. In the true spirit of a gambler, he learned to live only for the enjoyment of the present hour. He had always been addicted to pleasure; he now became a confirmed sensualist. The human appetite, like the human frame, soon adapts itself to circumstances. If we cannot get turtle and venison, we munch with sufficient *gusto* our simple meal of bread and cheese. Nay, if the latter relish be not forthcoming, we gnaw vigorously at the dry crust. With Katherine the shrew, rather than remain empty, we are fain to cry, "Why, then, the beef, and let the mustard rest;" nor have we even the heart to fall foul of mocking Grumio when he offers us "the mustard without the beef." Latimer used to be very particular about the flavour of his dry champagne, and the exact degree to which it was iced. He could drink gin and bad brandy now out of a battered-pewter measure, nor hesitated to qualify his morning draught of milk with that abominable mixture which is sold under the name of new rum. Let us see what he is doing at the door of that low store outside the town of Sydney, with the bright morning sun

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shining on his face, and children all about him, trooping off, clean and healthy, to school.

He is altered, shockingly altered. The fresh complexion is mottled and sodden, as it were, with drink. The eyes are dim, watery, and bloodshot. His figure has lost its squareness, but the body has become bloated, whilst the limbs have shrunk. His cherished whiskers, no longer oiled and curled with such tender care, run to waste beneath his chin in unkempt circles streaked with grey. His dress is frayed and shabby in the extreme, but looks the less so from being made of such coarse material as suits a working-man. He wears a red nightcap over one ear with an assumption of *bravado* still, and preserves through all his reverses a certain manliness, or call it rather audacity, of gesture and demeanour, the result of his adventurous life. There is a bad look, though, in those leering eyes of his, and as he lights a short pipe, and lifts that wicked face to the sun, the children pass the other side of the way, to avoid touching him. He smokes for a while in silence, and seems weighing some dubious matter in his mind. Once when a burst of childish laughter strikes upon his ear, he gives vent to a low curse, feels in his empty pockets, and turns on his heel with a louder and deeper oath.

"Cleaned out!" he mutters, "you incurable idiot. Well, it must go with the rest!"

A tawdry woman, with sunken eyes and dishevelled hair, cowering under a close-wrapped shawl of flaunting faded colours, walks up to him and lays her hand upon his shoulder. The hand, though dirty, is well-shaped, and the wasted features tell of former beauty, almost of refinement.

"Speak to me, Bill," she says; "you've never been home all night, dear; what luck?"

Her voice is kind and tender. She seems to trust and cling to him. Reprobate as the man is, he has found someone to make him a home, even here. He shakes her off, but not unkindly.

"Cleaned out!" he repeats. "The old story over and over again. Everything I put my hand to seems to rot and turn to rubbish. Whether it's land or houses, or sheep or stores, or dice or cards, all's one to me. There's a turn in the luck for other fellows; *I* never get a chance. It can't go on! I tell ye it *can't* go on. Best leave me, Jane, and try to shift for yourself. It's only a fool that sticks by a sinking ship!"

"Not likely," she answered, smiling rather sadly; "is it all gone, Bill? What did you play at?"

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A look of interest lights up her countenance while she asks the question. She is a gambler too, this faded, fallen woman, for his sake, and likes to hear of his successes and reverses because they are his. He swears horribly in reply.

"Monte!" he screams out, with a dreadful imprecation; and on that most gambling of games he continues to enlarge through a stream of blasphemous abuse that at length cannot but exhaust his passion and his lungs together.

It is maddening, doubtless, to recall the last night's orgy and its consequences. He had been paid the previous day a large sum of money for a wool-bargain, in which he had certainly not shown the simplicity of the poor shorn animal. He could not, of course, resist the temptation of turning into a spirit-store for the purpose of wetting his luck. There he sat and drank, this man, who had once been a member of second-rate clubs and dined at military messes, with the refuse of the worst population of Sydney, taking a strange, morbid pleasure, as it seemed, in the very ribaldry and indecency of his associates; even poor, abandoned Jane did not dare to look for him there, or fetch him thence till daylight. He caroused, and sang, and shouted with the rest—he treated them to liquor—he boasted of his money. With his eyes open, with his intellect no more affected by his potations than those of a man usually are who seldom goes to bed sober, he sat down deliberately to play cards with a party of ruffians, any one of whom had merited and probably earned transportation for life. He knew they would cheat him if they could. On occasion, he was not scrupulous in that way himself. He knew that fear of detection alone would make them hesitate for an instant to cut his throat, if by so doing they could get his money; and yet, knowing all this, such was the habitual craving for excitement, the restless thirst for gain engendered by his mode of life, that he seemed impelled by some irresistible power to risk his whole means, where he felt that chance, and fraud, and violence would all be combined against him.

At first he resolved of course that he would only play for a quarter of the sum he had about him—then the half, then he won, and he thought it would be a fine thing to double it, and so write the long-proposed letter, with a handsome enclosure to Ada. Fortune was going to smile upon him at last, he felt sure of it. The most experienced gambler is just as infatuated as the raw beginner. He was persuaded he should win his great stake to-night, and never try again. Then he lost—once, twice, sweeping ventures in succession.

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He must go on now, and get it back again at any risk; he should never forgive himself else. The cards seemed to be in league against him. He called for more drink, and now the worst passions of his nature blazed out. He accused his antagonist, a brawny, bearded ruffian, on his way to the gold diggings, *via* the hulks, of cheating, and the accusation, accompanied by the whole pack of cards, was flung back in his face; blows were exchanged, knives were drawn; the landlord and a gigantic negro, who performed the office of waiter, parted them before blood was spilt. Such outrages were neither rare nor much regarded, and the party, including Latimer, were soon set down to their game again as if nothing had happened. When the sun rose, he had but a hundred dollars left in the world. It is a strange feeling, that embarkation of the last venture, not without a hideous fascination of its own. The gambler's horizon becomes narrowed to the closest limits. His world is a circle of some two or three feet in diameter. Time is represented by the next deal of the cards. Every sense is sharpened on the keen whetstone of anxiety; yet strange to say, the very agony of suspense is dashed with something not entirely pain. There is a dull sensation of relief, too, when all is lost, consequent on the relaxation of the nerves, strung to so unendurable a pitch. When the cord is broken the bow cannot but spring back. Ere the sun had been up two hours, Latimer walked out of that reeking den into the pure air of heaven, for the hundredth time, a ruined man. The best of wives could hardly have refrained from expressing disapprobation, but she was *not* his wife, and she never reproached him so much as by a sign.

"We can begin again, Bill," she said, taking him by the arm to lead him home—such a home! "It's been as bad as this more than once before, and I'm stronger now, I can work."

His only answer was another imprecation; but he suffered her to take him on a few steps ere he stopped, and looking fixedly at her, shook himself loose from her hold once more.

"You're a good girl," he said, "you've a brave heart of your own. Look ye here, Jane, it's all up with me, this bout. I'll have to go to the diggings again, or maybe take to the bush, or worse. You and I'll part, not in unkindness, lass, not in unkindness; but what's the use of dragging you down any lower along with me? Don't take on so, girl! It must have come some day. What's the odds?"

She sobbed violently. She clasped her hands over his

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arm. He was in fustian, she in rags; both were depraved, immoral, desperate, yet the same feeling was tearing that poor sinful bosom, that stirred Cornelia's heart for the father of the Gracchi.

"Let me go with you!" she entreated; "I'll follow you" (follow *of* you, she expressed it) "to the end of the world."

Something almost like tears came into William Latimer's eyes as he bent down and kissed her poor, wan face.

"It can't be, my lass," he replied; "but I won't forget you, for all that. D——n it! Jane, you shan't starve. See here—I'll do for you what I've never done for man nor woman yet. Look at this" (he pulled the bracelet from his bosom as he spoke). "I've kept this safe for many a long day. I've held on to it when I hadn't a mag in my pocket, nor a crust in my wallet, nor a screw of 'baccy in my pipe. I thought never to have parted with it, never; but, I'll give it you, Jane, because you've been a good girl to me, and you'll keep it, lass, won't you, now, and think of me sometimes when I'm gone?"

Her eyes glistened as she stretched out her hand for those golden links glittering in the sun. For a moment she forgot they were to part, in the pleasure of her new acquisition, and the kind words with which he had accompanied his gift. She would not have been a woman, though, had she not looked quickly up in his face and asked him—

"Who gave it you?"

"My wife!" he replied, with something almost of shame. "Never mind about that. You take it, my dear. It's all you'll ever get from me; and so fare ye well!"

Perhaps it was the first unselfish action he had ever done in his life; and Latimer walked away with his hands in his empty pockets, and a feeling akin to exultation in his heart. He had not a farthing in the world, nor credit to obtain a meal. What of that? He had been on the brink of utter destitution so often, that he shrank but little from the precipice he had accustomed himself to contemplate. To do him justice, he was more concerned for the future of the poor woman who clung to him so trustingly, than for his own. He liked to think he had done the best he could for her, though he should not see her again.

He had no property, and but few clothes, which, indeed, were not worth returning for; so his intention was to walk off into the open country without delay, and take his chance of some menial employment to procure him food. Last night's excesses were still ringing in his brain, and he did not yet

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appreciate the forlorn condition to which he had sunk. He strode on, sucking the short, black pipe, and wondering vaguely what would become of him. The sun was hot, and vice had sapped his once powerful frame. Ere he had gone a mile or two, he sat down to rest by the wayside, and so dropped off to sleep. He was woke by some soft substance thrust under his head—the poor woman had followed him, and stripped off her ragged shawl to make him a pillow. He swore at her in return, and bade her go back to the town, and not interfere with him any more.

“It will be the worse for you if you do,” he growled. “What made me give you that bit of filigree, but for a keep-sake? Be off with you at once.”

“You gave it me for my own,” she answered, “to do what I liked with. Look here.”

She showed him a handful of gold and silver. Ada’s last gift had brought enough money to keep them for weeks to come. His face relented as he looked at the coin.

“We’ll have a parting glass together, at least,” he said, with a brutal laugh, preparing to retrace his steps towards the town. She folded his hand in both of hers, and pressed it to her bosom.

“Take it all—all,” she urged, in eager, imploring tones. “I got it only for you. But don’t leave me; don’t drive me away from you! Bill, Bill, I have but you in the world.”

CHAPTER XLV

THE WIFE

“ I SEE her go by yesterday to the post-office, it’s but the second time since she’s come. She’s never asked for a letter yet, I *know*. It’s my belief there’s something more than queer about her, for all her black dress and thick veil.”

The speaker was a stout buxom personage with a loud shrill voice, and a pair of bare arms smeared with flour. No bad specimen of the English matron of the middle class. Bustling, warm-hearted, suspicious, thrifty, prolific, and uncharitable. She brought up her young family in the rugged paths of virtue, and conducted the business—a combination of baking, grocery, tea, pepper, snuff, and tobacco—with vigilance and energy. She was much respected, not to say feared, in her native town; by none more so than by her master, as she called him, a ghostlike personage, who might be seen at times pervading the back shop, appearing and disappearing through a trap-door like the elder Hamlet, and sustaining his spiritual character, by never speaking unless spoken to. He was a quiet man, was Mr. Barber, with a turn for meditation, and his wife was a thought too much for him.

“ She’ve a been to church regular since she come,” answered a little, musty old woman, like a moth, who was purchasing with her ounce or two of tea the right to her hebdomadal gossip in Mrs. Barber’s shop, a favourite lounge, indeed, as commanding the linen-draper’s and the post-office; “ but she always waits till every one of ’em’s gone afore she leaves her pew; and though she give me a shilling only last Sunday, she never lifted her veil, and she durstn’t look me in the face. Such airs! She’s no widder-woman, not she, mem. I should know, Mrs. Barber, for troubles I’ve seen, and troubles I’ve come through. ’Ow’s Jemima? poor lamb, she do take on so with her teething.”

Such digressions are not unusual in the conversation of ladies who adorn this rank of life; and Jemima’s infirmities

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disposed of, the original topic was reverted to with renewed vigour.

"It's weeks she's been here, Mrs. Mould," resumed the proprietress, placing one arm akimbo, and the other with thumb reversed upon the counter, "and nobody knows no more about her and her belongings nor when first she come. I never see her go out a-hairing, or what not, till dusk, and nobody will tell me that's what a respectable woman's been used to. I don't like your fly-by-nights, Mrs. Mould, and I never did. She may be this, and she may be that, but I say I can't make her out, I can't, nor Barber can't make her out, nor nobody can't make her out."

"She come respectable, too, at first," observed Mrs. Mould meditatively. "First-class railway ticket, two trunks, and a bonnet-box. It's truth, mem, for my lad, you know, he got a job up at the station. She pays regular, too, for what she has—little enough it is, they do tell me; but she's free with her money, for that matter. It's hard to tell, though; the worst is the least likely to want, more's the pity. Deary me! it's a queer world!"

Mrs. Mould was quite right, it *is* a queer world. Why did they think ill of the stranger, these two honest, hard-working gossips? Simply because they knew nothing of her; and it seems to come so much more natural to suspect than to confide. Even in that remote country town, with its branch railway and its one hotel—by courtesy so called—its half a dozen shops, its annual fair, and perennial stagnation, the drowsy inhabitants were as prone to think evil of their neighbours as if they formed the most bustling community of the most mercantile city in the world, where it is everybody's business to get the better of somebody else on the shortest notice. "No trust" seems to be the motto on the turnpike road of life. The toll-keeper is but a fair specimen of his kind. "Will you trust me?" says the bagman, as he pulls up and ungloves, loth, even in the act of payment, to resist his commercial tendency to a joke. "Why should I?" answers the toll-keeper, "I don't know you." "Will you trust me to-day?" reiterates the waggish traveller on his return. "Not I," repeats the toll-keeper, "I know you too well." We are all toll-keepers or bagmen, I think. Confiding reader, would you trust any man you don't know? Experienced wayfarer, how many would you trust of those you do?

The lady who afforded a never-failing subject of conversation to the fair inhabitants of this quiet country town, had arrived there several weeks previous to the above dialogue,

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during which time she had perseveringly led a life of the strictest seclusion, resisting all advances to acquaintance with resolution indeed, but with a sad pleading humility that was very touching. Once when a neighbour's child was taken suddenly ill, she had afforded prompt assistance, both pecuniary and personal; but on the patient's recovery she had obviously repudiated the friendship of its parents, and avoided every opportunity of accepting their thanks. When the curate of the parish called on her, an old grey-headed priest, who had been labouring in the vineyard through the burden and heat of the day, satisfied with his present penny in consideration of his future pension, she had consistently denied him admittance. Even that charitable man feared she was a lost sheep, and could only hope she might be a Magdalene. Nay, more wonderful than all, though the few observers who had been fortunate enough to behold it pronounced her face one of extraordinary beauty and sweetness, she was notorious for concealing that face with the most studious vigilance, and even preferred to take her stroll for fresh air in the early morning before anyone was up, or after dusk, when she tried to pass from her quiet lodgings unobserved, it is hardly necessary to add, in vain.

This last precaution was a heavy grievance. Mrs. Barber was not the only lady who "couldn't abide your fly-by-nights." They are close reasoners, these women, on a system of logic peculiarly their own. "Why," said they, "should she live so retired if she don't want to hide herself? Why should she want to hide herself unless she's done something to be ashamed of? What crime can a person like that have committed save *one*? Depend upon it, ma'am, she's no better than she should be."

To the masculine mind one or two links in the above chain of argument may seem wanting. To the female intellect, with its imaginative powers and steadfast adherence to a foregone conclusion, the evidence is final and satisfactory. So they voted Ada Latimer (I can hardly bear to write it) somebody's disgraced wife or cast-off mistress; and after a while, if she should accidentally cross the street, Mrs. Barber would call in her children from playing on the doorstep; and Mrs. Mould, a custodian of morals in virtue of her ecclesiastical office, would wrap herself in all the dignity of unassailed and unassailable virtue, and, like the Pharisee in the parable, pass by on the other side.

And what was Ada doing in this quiet, little country town? I must go back a space to explain her motives.

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She had lingered in London—who can blame her?—till the crisis of Gilbert's illness was past, and she had ascertained, as women do find out things, that he was no longer in danger. Then she fell upon her knees and thanked the God who never had deserted her, and rose up, determined to be gone. Do not judge her too harshly that she was not strong enough to be within a few streets of him, and never wished to see him. Many and many a time had she cast up, so to speak, and balanced the account in her own mind. On one side, the delirium of a few years; on the other, two souls lost for an eternity. And yet—she shuddered to think that she could weigh the alternative—there was no safety for her but in flight. She called up the worn ghastly face, with its wasted features and hollow eyes, as she saw it last, betwixt life and death, on its pillow, and dwelt upon it till she felt as if her brain was going. If he should come and plead with her, looking as he did then. What could she do? She knew its power too well. Why, even now she thirsted but to look upon it once more, and then to die. She must never see him again, never, for both their sakes. That always seemed to make it easier. When they parted before, she had wisely left London, for she knew that no efforts would be wanting on his part to find her out, and had gone to the north of England, where, under a feigned name, she had recommenced her laborious career as a teacher of music. But even this occupation she feared was too public. One or two circumstances, slight in themselves, and perhaps only apparent to her excited imagination, made her fancy she was not safe from discovery even there; and after her return to London, and departure from it a second time, she had again changed her place of residence, and resolved to live for a fixed period in a state of the strictest seclusion. The path of duty was plain enough; she must go and join her husband in Australia. Well did she know what a life was before her. Hard living, hard work, hard words, would be her portion; but it seemed she would rather it should be so; that luxury and comfort would be unbearable, and time for thought to be dreaded above all. That nothing-can-hurt-me-now feeling is desolation indeed. She had been painfully uncertain about Latimer's movements as well. Till his second letter arrived, definitely postponing his return to England, she could come to no decision; and even that letter was so worded as to convince her that she would be most unwelcome when she did reach him. After its reception, however, she seemed to make up her mind. She had enough money left, the proceeds of her professional

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exertions, to pay her passage out to Sydney. In the meantime, she husbanded her resources with economy; and although, as Mrs. Mould had ascertained, she paid honestly for everything she bought, the purchases were but few, and limited to the mere necessaries of life.

Her movements were watched with a vigilance that can only be conceived by those who have ever resided in a small country town; and Mrs. Barber was perfectly correct when she affirmed that the mysterious stranger had visited the post-office but twice during her stay. The first time she had posted a letter to her husband in Australia, the second was on the very day that witnessed my arrival at West Acres. On that occasion she hesitated long ere she dropped the missive into the fatal box. Mrs. Barber, prying from amongst her miscellaneous stores, watched it despatched with intense gratification. Had she known its contents she might have judged that lonely woman less harshly for pity's sake.

The evening was falling while the two chief gossips of the town gave their final award upon Mrs. Latimer's character. She had just passed up the street in her usual black dress, and the thick veil that gave such offence. She thought she would soon leave England for ever, and she would look upon its homely beauties now whilst she could. Moreover, after a great mental effort, as after a physical struggle, the very frame seems to gasp for fresh air. I think the spirit can dominate the body with less difficulty in the free open country; and I can well understand the feeling which prompts many a man to wish that when his time comes he may die out of doors.

Ada Latimer walked on towards the sunset by the side of a sluggish river. The damp haze of evening rose moist and chill about her, the autumn leaves dropped noiselessly in her path, not stirred by the breeze, because the air was calm and still, but perishing, like everything on earth, by the inevitable process of decay. The time and the season were in keeping with her own thoughts. A merry, hopeful, spring day would have broken her heart.

As the shadows darkened around her she walked on and on. One favourite haunt she had already found where certain stately chestnuts and a few acres of level sward reminded her of Kensington Gardens. Thither mechanically she directed her steps. At another time, like any other delicate woman, she might have felt alarmed thus to stroll by herself in the deepening twilight through lonely meadows

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and unfrequented paths ; but Ada had no fears now. 'Tis a fluctuating quality, that same disregard of danger, depending much upon the value of what we risk. The first in the breach, for aught we know, may be a man whose present state is such that it would be rather an advantage to be knocked on the head than otherwise. Private Jones may be certain, if he escape the perils of the assault to-day, that he will be flogged to-morrow for the violence and rapine of yesterday. Sergeant Brown, on the contrary, is safe to be promoted, if he be not killed, wife and children provided for, long years of meritorious services rewarded at last. I think Brown deserves most credit for courage when he scrambles over the parapet alongside of Jones. "Nothing to lose and all to win," should make a man a hero if anything will ; and

"Let him take castles who has ne'er a groat,"

is the sentiment of a shrewd observer of human nature, though put into the mouth of a common soldier.

When she reached the spot at which it was her habit to turn, she sat down upon the steps of a certain stile, and, for the first time, ventured to review the reflections of the past twenty-four hours. She was human, after all ; and the final struggle had been very severe and exhausting. So long as she remained in England, so long as the same sky covered them, the same topics interested them ; nay, so long as it was possible they might see the same people—such is the sophistry of love—she felt that every link was not completely torn asunder. Therefore she believed she must fly—therefore she thought the sacrifice could not be perfected unless they were parted even in thought—therefore she must give him up unreservedly, and once for all.

Those may blame you, gentle, sorrowing Ada, who have never been so tried, even for your sufferings. "It was her duty never to think of him for an instant, to dismiss him at once from her mind," says Cornelia ; and doubtless the Roman matron is right. It is well for those whose affections can thus be managed "like a steed that knows its rider." It is better, perhaps, for those whose affections require the spur rather than the curb ; but I can feel for you if Cornelia cannot. I knew him so well in his happy days—his kindly, cheerful disposition, his winning manner, his varied accomplishments, his refinement of feeling, his deference to all women, his devotion to *one*, his frankness, his generosity, above all, his brave and loving heart. It must have been a hard task for any woman to give up Gilbert Orme.

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It is done, however. The last few weeks had made Ada comparatively an old woman. Incessant thought, racking memories, maddening temptation, had furrowed even her fair, gentle brow, and brought a thread or two of white amongst the glossy hair. It seemed that she must be racked to the utmost, for not the least of her tortures was the doubt of her right to wish him a last farewell—not in person, that she would never have dared to contemplate—but a few kind words by letter. Stern Conscience said No; but Memory called up a vision of the dear face and the kind eyes she had loved so fondly, and the aching heart pleaded hard for that slight relief.

“Poor fellow! I am glad I wrote to him,” said she, sitting on the step of the stile alone in the dark night. And then she drew her shawl round her, and fell a-thinking.

When hope is done with, when we feel that a certain era of our life is concluded; that we have closed, as it were, one of the volumes and put it back upon the shelf, never to be taken down again, there comes over the mind a kind of retrospective *clairvoyance*, to which the everyday efforts of memory are but blurred and indistinct daubs. Can it be something like this which they say pervades the brain of a drowning man (the only death, by the way, in which mortals seem to be permitted to put one foot over the fatal threshold and then draw it back again), and which recalls to him, as it were in a magic mirror, every scene of his past existence, from his earliest childhood to his present suffocation? We have most of us felt something akin to this painful faculty when kneeling by the couch of a dead friend or mourning over the buried hopes that were more to us than all the friends in the world. We are most of us conscious that there are certain turns in the road of life at which we pause and look back upon the past stage, feeling that the next step we take will shut it out from our vision for ever, whether it hath been across a barren moor, or along a rich valley teeming with corn and wine, or through the enchanted garden where the sunlight lingers still, though we have passed into the shade, and of which a fragrance yet clings around us from the roses, though our limbs be torn and festering with the thorns. We cannot forget, we say, in our self-commiseration—God help us! Do we try?

Ada soon lost herself in the long-labyrinth of the past. She went back to her first meeting with the gay, light-hearted Mr. Orme; to the dinner at the old alderman's, and the exultation with which she had found herself in society—and such agreeable society—once more; to the self-confidence and

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self-content that pleasant evening had given her, and the undefined hope, so soothing in its dim uncertainty, that she might perhaps see him again. Then she remembered how her heart used to beat when he overtook her in the Park, and how well she knew that step amongst a hundred others, long before it came up with her; how she had wept, and grieved, and fretted ere she forced herself to forego those cherished interviews, and how hurt and angry she felt at his fancied defalcation, although she had told herself all along that he had never belonged to her, and never could. Was it all pain that made her eyes run over while she recalled their conversation at the Villa, and those weeks of intense happiness that succeeded the avowal of his love? Ah! he was her own, then—her very own. Nothing came between them but a sense of her unworthiness, and that seemed but to enhance her trust in him, the generous, the chivalrous, and the kind. How proudly she used to watch him when he left her, and how her heart would swell with very triumph to feel that she had won that noble, gentle, unselfish being—so loyal, so hopeful, and so true. She would weep from sheer excess of joy to think of her own happiness. It was no easy task to bid him leave her. When he had fairly sailed, she fancied that she was very lonely and unhappy. Oh! could she but go back to those days, and be now as she was then!

It would not do; it was unendurable to recall the trials and the miseries of the succeeding time—the torturing anxieties of his illness, and the crushing agony of that last sight of him on his sick-bed when she bade him farewell. She should go mad, she thought, if she dwelt on these afflictions, yet had they been present with her, sleeping and waking, ever since. Was there nothing left? Nothing to live for, nothing to hope, nothing to pray for here or hereafter? But one glimpse of light in the black darkness! she pleaded—one drop of balm to sooth the cruel stripes—one ray of hope to help her with the heavy load along the weary way!

The chill misty evening had long ere this merged into night. As Ada lifted her white face in imploring eagerness to heaven, a star or two broke forth in the dreary sky, and a watery moon, rising through the haze, shed its pale light over the dark meadows, and the shadowy hedges, and the nodding elms by which she was surrounded. The night wind, too, was rising fitfully in gusts, moaning and sighing at intervals, and hushing off again into stillness. Without, all was mournful, cheerless, and desolate; within, an icy grasp seemed to be closing round her heart. Yet Ada prayed to the God who made

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her, that He would have mercy upon her now in her great sorrow. Leaning her forehead against the smooth-worn bar of the stile, she poured forth her wild, despairing petition, only that they might not be parted for ever—that she might see him again, not here, not here, but in another life—in the heaven she strove so hard to win;—at least, that where he was, there might she be also, and so see him again, only see him again!

As she rose, his well-known figure came into the moonlight, and crossing the path in front of her, stopped an instant and looked her steadfastly in the face. His countenance was very pale, and there was the same eager, mournful look in the deep eyes that she remembered so well when he was pleading with her for his life's happiness.

“Gilbert! Gilbert!—did you get my letter?” she exclaimed, stretching out her arms, as she staggered rather than ran towards him in the tumult of her feelings. Ere she could reach him he was gone.

Just then the breeze, rising once more, bore with it the chimes of the town-clock, striking the half-hour after nine. Those familiar sounds recalled her to herself, and she was aware that she was shivering with cold and her feet were dripping wet. Looking down she perceived the marks of her own footsteps in the dewy film that stood on the thick saturated herbage through which she had passed when she left the path to follow him; yet was there no track but this on either side the footway. She did not faint, she did not cry out nor moan; but a vague horror seemed to creep over her and enfold her, as a corpse is folded in its shroud. Though she walked home with swift, unflinching steps, she moved bewildered and half-conscious, like one in a dream.

Was it better to have seen him thus than not at all?

CHAPTER XLVI

ATROPOS



I AM no believer in presentiments. I never went to bed more thoroughly wearied and disposed for sleep, than on the evening which bestowed four people so happily, which witnessed the total breaking up of John Gordon's habitual reserve, the subjection of Lady Gertrude's pride, and the hearty self-satisfaction of the good-natured peer who was to make Bella Jones a viscountess. They slept light, the four, I doubt not, or lay awake looking far into the rosy future, peopled with its shining visions of love and faith and confidence, and all that makes life worth having. What need had they of dreams—those glowing hearts, steeped in their "sober certainty of waking bliss"? Not for such doth judicious Proserpine think it worth while to uncloset the Ivory Gate, and despatch her shadowy doves to flit around the sleeper's couch. No; it is the fevered cheek of the hopeless that they fan with their downy wings. It is to the broken and the lost that they bring the thrilling memories and the magic wealth and the maddening impossibilities of a dream. It is to those who lay their heads down, praying that they may never rise again, that sleep restores what fate has snatched away. Then the stern consort of the king of hell smiles in her sad beauty, for she knows that when they wake to reality in the grey morning once more, the last drop of bitterness shall have been poured in which the cup of life will hold.

I had neither hopes nor fears to keep my eyes open. The one memory that has never left me in all these years, shining through the far distance still, like a star of heaven eternal and unchanged, had smiled upon me ere I sank to rest. I was not anxious, nor was I alarmed, but simply a little saddened by the recollections of the day, and very tired.

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So I think my slumbers were the soundest of all the sleepers in that large house—of all save one.

I was woke by a gentle tap at my bedroom door, and the voice of Gilbert's valet, an attached fellow, who had been with him through his illness, calling me by name.

"May I come in, sir?" he said, in an agitated whisper, as though loth to disturb the rest of the household; "I want to speak to you, if you please."

I huddled on a few clothes, and opened the shutters to let in the cold light of the misty morning, just beginning to dawn.

The man was dressed as he had waited at dinner; evidently he had been sitting up all night. His face was very pale, and he trembled. I knew something dreadful had happened before he spoke.

"Mr. Orme!—sir," he said, trying to steady his voice; "he's never been to bed all night, sir! I beg your pardon for disturbing you, but I've been to his door several times. I—I can't get him to hear!"

What made me feel so horror-struck, and yet so little surprised?

"He must have gone to sleep at his writing-table," I answered, in corresponding tones of caution. Whence had I the intuition that, even while the words passed my lips, convicted me of a lie?

The man grasped eagerly at the suggestion. He was a ready fellow, I knew, and with better nerves than the generality of his order.

"He ought to be woke, sir," said he, recovering his breath and colour. "He'll catch his death of cold there, with the fire out. I can't get into the room because the door's locked. I didn't like to disturb the other gentlemen, or any of the family; but I thought you wouldn't take it amiss, sir, if I came to ask you what I'd better do."

By this time I was dressed; the man handing me my things unconsciously, and from mere habit, as I wanted them. When we got into the passage he turned pale once more—

"I can take the lock off the door, sir," he whispered, "if you think it necessary."

We reached his room. It was on the ground-floor, and far apart from any of the bed-chambers, so there was no fear of disturbing the other sleepers. As a matter of form I knocked twice or thrice pretty loudly, then sent the man to fetch his tools for forcing the door. How long he seemed to be gone!—and yet what a vague impression have I of that interval. He returned at last. That was a moment of

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breathless suspense, which I shall never forget, when the lock came off, and fell with a clink upon the floor. We both paused while one might have counted ten. Neither had courage to open the door and confront the horror that each had so dreaded, yet would not confess even to himself.

I pushed it back at last, and walked in. The fire was out, but candles were still burning, and the window curtains drawn. The first thing I observed was Gilbert's watch upon the carpet.

My boy sat with his back to us, still in his shooting-dress; his head had sunk upon the writing-table, and lay pillowed on one arm; the other hand hung listlessly over the edge, but the fingers were clenched into the palm. I touched it with mine, scarce knowing what I did. It was quite cold.

"He's asleep," said the shaking valet, in a hoarse whisper. "He's never dressed since he came in, and he's fallen off to sleep in his chair."

"He is indeed asleep, Jones," was all I could answer, "and so sound that he will never wake again."

Soon there were noises of hurrying feet in the passage, and pale faces one behind another blocking up the doorway, and suppressed whispers at intervals, and then the awful silence that seizes those who look upon the dead. I was relieved to see Holyhead and Gordon amongst the shuddering servants, and to learn that Gilbert's relatives had not yet been disturbed.

"Lady Olivia must be told of this at once," said the latter. "I will undertake that duty. Send off immediately for a doctor, and secure all these letters and papers without loss of time."

So we lifted him up and carried him away, and laid him down gently and tenderly on his own bed. Afterwards we returned and fastened up the chamber of death.

Then I felt for the first time that the blow had fallen. I was half stupefied, stunned, as it were, and numbed before; but I knew it now. I knew that I should never, never see him again. The blinding tears did my old eyes good—the blinding tears that came so fast as I thought of his cruel fate. The bright, the brave, the beautiful. Was this the end of all? My boy!—my boy!

CHAPTER XLVII

DUST TO DUST

IT is needless to dwell on the painful details that succeeded the catastrophe of Gilbert's fate—the necessary precautions, the cruel inquiries, the frightful suspicion, the solemn hush that pervaded the house, the dreary efforts to talk of other matters with the family, the bursts of feeling that would not be controlled. His mother scarcely appeared to realise the fact of her bereavement, yet, now that she had lost him, the maternal tenderness, of which we all thought her incapable, seemed suddenly to have sprung into life. The very servants remarked that Lady Olivia would not allow the merest trifle to be moved from the place where her son had put it. She would sit for hours looking at the chair he used to occupy. With her own hands and a stern silence she moved a portrait of him taken as a boy from the library to her bedroom. The horses he rode were to remain in the stable; the dogs he shot over never to be sold or given away; a small pencil-case that he had left between the leaves of a book on the drawing-room table was privately seized by his mother and hoarded away. Long afterwards I saw it in her workbox. She observed the direction of my eyes, and immediately shut down the lid. Who knows how that proud, impassible woman may have suffered? Who can guess the regrets and vain longings that tore her heart when it was too late? I believe his image was oftener present to her now as the blooming child than the grown man. And she had not even pressed his hand to wish him a last good-bye.

As for Gertrude, she was inconsolable. Her own late-won happiness but made her seem the more sensitive to this overwhelming sorrow. True to his memory in her sisterly affection, she would only rouse herself to defend it from all and every imputation. She could love even John Gordon the better for his loyalty to the dead. That resolute and clear-sighted nature was of infinite use to us in our troubles. Poor Holyhead was so prostrated and unmanned, that he

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was incapable of offering assistance or advice. In his warm, impulsive heart, so little affected by the conventional usages of society, he had loved Gilbert with more than a brother's love, he mourned him with the abandonment of more than a brother's sorrow. John, with his calm exterior and his unruffled presence of mind, was our mainstay and our sheet-anchor; but even he gave way at last. When they moved the coffin gravely and carefully from the death-chamber, John Gordon turned his face to the wall, and wept—that strong, unimpressionable man, wept like a little child.

I have Gilbert's watch in my possession now. I have never wound it up, and the hands still point to half-past nine. At that hour it seems to have fallen on the floor, and so stopped. It may have been swept from the table by the last movement that convulsed the body ere the soul quitted it. I know not. I have pondered on it long and earnestly. I cannot but think he died at half-past nine.

By degrees we acquired courage to face the necessary ordeal; by degrees we elicited certain facts from which to form our own conclusions. Gilbert had been in the habit of taking laudanum in large quantities. His constitution was already much impaired by this injurious practice, the only respite, as he was once heard to say, from "the worm that dieth not." On the evening in question, he had found his letters, which arrived by the afternoon post, according to custom, on his writing-table. The groom of the chambers, who had gone to his master's room and brought us the message not to wait dinner, had been refused admittance, but stated that he could not help observing Mr. Orme's voice was very much altered when he spoke to him through the door, and even that discreet official remembered to have hazarded a suggestion to a fellow-servant, that his master must either have got some bad news, or been taken suddenly ill. His orders not to be disturbed were so peremptory, that nobody had ventured near him, save Gertrude with the tea. As he did not answer her, she concluded he had passed into his other apartment to dress, and would join them later in the drawing-room, or that he was tired and gone to bed. Poor Gertrude! ever since she has reproached herself that she did not force an entrance; and yet, what good could she have done? Nobody knows exactly at what hour he fell into his death-sleep, nor when he woke from it on the other side of the narrow boundary. A phial marked "Laudanum" stood in its accustomed place, about half full. His servants were accustomed to see it there, and did not think of watching

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the diminution of its contents. The cautious physician, who arrived too late, gave it as his opinion, that "enough of the narcotic had been taken to produce death ten times over, in a frame unaccustomed to its use; but that the same quantity was not necessarily fatal under peculiar circumstances, and in a case like the present, where the deceased was confirmed in the habit of resorting to this pernicious anodyne." There could be no doubt that something had distressed and wounded him beyond endurance; that his spirit, harassed and tortured for so long, had completely given way, and he had flown for relief to that fatal remedy, in which alone he could hope to find oblivion and repose. There was no question that he had died from the effects of laudanum. He was in the habit of taking it, and we resolved that, inadvertently, he must have taken too much.

Those who had the right went through the melancholy duty of examining his papers. He left no will, and his affairs were much involved; frightful inroads on the fine hereditary property of the Ormes having been made during the last year; but of this we took little heed. It is a sad and painful duty to inspect all the little items and minutiae that bring before us so forcibly the reality of our loss, that seem, as it were, imbued with the very presence of the dead. To select one from among the little trinkets we know so well—the ring we remember to have seen on his finger; the book he loved and quoted; the knife he habitually used—to go over the trifling articles of his toilet, the little everyday accessories of life, the well-known clothes he wore; to peruse in routine the business letters of which he has kept copies; to weep over the familiar signature, and wonder at the so recent date. All these duties must necessarily wring the hearts of the survivors; and yet, in their weary routine and the unavoidable exertion they entail, do they mercifully and gradually inure us to his loss. Ah! had we nothing to do but to sit down with our hands before us and think, there are some sorrows that the heart of man could not confront. There are some partings that, if we had leisure to dwell upon them, would turn our very brain. After the first stunning sensation of the blow, comes the agony of pain, from which we sink into a hopeless lethargy. Were we not roused by the spur of necessity, we should soon follow the beloved one across the dark river, before our time.

One letter lay open beneath his arm, as he stooped over the table against which he died. It was given me to read by those whose delicacy of feeling forbade them to

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examine more than the signature, and who did not hesitate thus far to confide in my honour and discretion. It had been awaiting him on his return from shooting, and was posted the day before in the quiet country town selected for her retreat by Ada Latimer. It was no long epistle, and yet she seemed to have lingered over its conclusion with a sad, wistful foreboding of evil, and a natural repugnance to divide with her own hand the last link of all. It breathed, nevertheless, a tone of humble resignation throughout; and although something of feminine restraint prevented the open avowal of her feelings, it was evident that the writer had nothing more to look forward to in this world, and trusted but in the one fond hope of meeting him, where there would be neither sin nor sorrow, in the next. She expressed firmly enough her determination to leave England forthwith, and to seek out her husband beyond seas, although she was well aware of his disinclination to receive her. "The path of duty," she said, "she had resolved to follow undeviatingly for the remainder of the short journey. And now," she added, "we shall never meet again on this side the grave. We shall not even hear of each other. We must ignore the whole of the past. We must even forget that we were ever more than friends. Therefore I am not ashamed to confess that I loved you once very dearly; that in those days I would have followed you barefoot to the end of the world; that I would have lived with you and died with you the happiest woman on earth. All that is over now. I depart immediately; and, believe me, I take this step of my own free choice. The only kindness you can do me now is to forget me. I *wish* you to do so. I pray night and morning that you will. Farewell."

Generous, pure-hearted Ada! I cannot but fear he was incapable of appreciating your noble self-devotion. I cannot but think he would sorely misinterpret the conclusion of your touching letter. He had expressed to me that very day the bitterness with which he reflected on what he was pleased to term your desertion of him. His heart leapt with renewed hope and joy when I told him of your visit to his sick-bed. Who shall guess at the revulsion of feeling produced by your farewell? There are some matters that will never be cleared up till we have all learned the grand secret—some simple facts that we shall never know till we know the simplest and commonest of all. Perhaps the fiercest struggles, the noblest instances of fortitude, the boldest acts of courage on record, have been far surpassed by those, which none have been

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present to witness, and over which death hath drawn an impenetrable veil. We cannot tell. In our ignorance of causes, we can but judge blindly and erringly of effects.

Alas for Gilbert! All I know is that the letter lay open beneath his body, and the bottle of laudanum stood half-emptied on the shelf.

CHAPTER XLVIII

THE CHIEF MOURNER

IT was midwinter, and the snow fell heavily—such a winter as people call old-fashioned—which means many uninterrupted weeks of gloomy skies, and landscapes wrapped in white. I was still at West Acres. There was so much to be looked into, and so many arrangements to make, which could only devolve upon the late possessor's oldest friends, that I found my presence indispensable, and could not abandon my post. It is strange, perhaps a little melancholy, to observe how soon matters relapse into their ordinary routine, even after the most painful bereavement. Though the tree that has been felled may be one of the finest and largest in the forest, may have left a gap that it seems at first sight can never be filled up, it is wonderful how soon the grass and weeds begin to spread over the vacant space, and the neighbouring branches to approach, till they interlace at last across the narrowing void, so that on our return we scarcely miss the giant that has been laid low, or perhaps decide that a loss so easily repaired is rather a gain than the reverse.

Household cares, household comforts, household duties went on, just as if the master were not sleeping beneath the snow. Lady Olivia, dark and stern, more silent, more imperious, more exacting than ever, alluded neither by word nor gesture to her loss. Lady Gertrude, though she would weep bitterly at times, if anything reminded her unexpectedly of her cousin, had yet a thousand occupations and distractions in the details of her approaching marriage, impending though postponed. John Gordon was in London, indeed she wrote to him every day; and Holyhead in Yorkshire, preparing for the reception of his future viscountess, and to her intense gratification corresponding with the same diurnal regularity. These two good fellows had lost their dearest and oldest comrade. No friends could have been more faithful—no mourners more sincere—but what can you expect? They had other ties, other hopes, other interests; for them all that made life

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worth having, did not go down to the grave with Gilbert. So they set their houses in order for their coming brides, and bespoke plate and linen, and purchased appropriate ornaments, and bustled about like the rest of us, as if they were to live for ever, thinking of "poor Gilbert" perhaps three or four times a week, perhaps not so often.

I believe the old retriever and myself were the two beings that missed him most of all.

Between nine and ten one night, I was returning to the Hall from a visit to a sick person in the neighbouring village. The poor fellow was an old acquaintance, who had worked for many years about the place and grounds. I had been reading him a chapter in the Bible, and the dying man was much comforted and impressed with its holy truths. "He was ready to go," he said, "now his day's work was done," and seemed to please himself with the illustration of the labourer in the vineyard, and to look forward with a certain sense of reality to receiving his wages from his Lord. The very last words he spoke to me were these:—"I am too weak to thank you for your kindness now. I shall meet you again, and thank you in heaven."

I was in a more serious mood than common as I left the cottage, and I resolved to pass by the churchyard, as I had done several times already, and spend a few minutes by the side of Gilbert's grave. A low square tomb with a plain inscription had been lately put up over the spot where he slept. I felt I should like to stand by it a while, and think of my boy. The dead seem nearer to us when we are in the very place where we saw them laid, and poor humanity draws some strange futile consolation from the idea, as though if it were possible for us to see them again on earth, they would be more likely to meet us here than elsewhere. Vain as may be the longing, I believe we are none of us without it, and yet when was it ever gratified? I often think one of the greatest and holiest mysteries in this mysterious lot of ours is the persuasion that we feel, contrary to our senses and our experience, of some hidden link between ourselves and those who have gone before us to the shadowy land. We weep for them, refusing to be comforted—we mourn them, ay, mourn as those without hope—and yet something tells us that we shall not always be thus fettered and powerless; that a time will come when we shall burst the material trammels that now clog and madden us; that the spirit shall predominate at last in its immortality, and if the universe holds them, we shall meet our beloved again. There had been heavy snow

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during the day, and more was still falling. The ground was covered a foot deep, so it was as light as noon; the old church stood boldly out against a white background, and every hedge and plantation that intersected the hill behind it was traced as distinctly as the line of a pencil-drawing on a sheet of paper. I could see where the home meadows ended, and Farmer Giles's close began. I could even distinguish the open gateway into the forty acres, and far beyond that the long straggling ash wood, and the black bank of gorse that constituted the fox-covert. Poor Gilbert! it was a favourite spot of his, enclosed and cherished under his immediate eye. He would never see it drawn again.

I passed through the wicket into the churchyard. As I turned an angle of the building, and came suddenly in sight of his grave, I was startled to observe *something black*, that seemed to be thrown, as it were, across the tomb. For an instant I thought of a dog's fidelity and the old retriever; the next, I saw it was a woman's figure, and I knew it could only be Ada Latimer.

She was stretched upon her face across the broad square surface of the stone. Her bonnet and cloak had come off unheeded. Her brown hair swept in heavy masses over her neck and arms. She did not writhe, nor sob, nor wail, but lay there under the heavy sky and the falling snow, prostrate and motionless, like the dead.

A horrid fear came over me, but I shook it off, and went to her with noiseless steps, and took her hand, and spoke to her by name.

Then she rose, slowly, deliberately, neither startled nor surprised, and turned upon me her seeking eyes, that seemed indeed prepared to meet some other face than mine. That eager, sorrowing gaze remained unchanged for a few seconds—then the wistful eyes grew dim, the pale lips writhed, the wan set features contracted with a sudden spasm. She was back in the lonely world again. She sank once more upon her knees, laid her forehead against the cold wet stone, and wept without restraint.

After a while she grew calmer, and suffered me to raise her and wrap her in her cloak, for she was shivering with cold. Her sobs, too, subsided, for she had more self-command than most men; and she took my hand in both of hers, and spoke to me for the first time.

"I could not go away without coming here," she said. "Do you think it was so very wrong? May God have mercy on me! Have I not been punished enough?"

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I had not heard her voice for many months. I should not have recognised it for hers, so changed was it, and hoarse, and broken now. I soothed and consoled her as best I could. I scarcely know what I said. How can the tongue of man comfort such grief as hers? Soon she made an effort to summon all her strength, and, though she still shook with cold, her voice was steadier as she resumed.

“I only saw it in the newspapers—the horrid, horrid suspicions—the dreadful inquiry. I cannot suffer more than I have done. Do not be afraid to tell me everything. I can bear the worst now!”

It seemed best to give way to her. Surely she had a right to know. I related all the painful story nearly as I have related it to you. I told her of my walk home with him. I was indeed the last person who had seen him alive. I described our sad conversation, and the morbid state of feeling to which he had brought himself. I did not even conceal his great, troubled joy when he learned that she had visited his sick-bed; nay, I had not the cruelty to withhold from her the last words I heard him speak as he rushed to his chamber to be alone—“O God! she loves me still.”

A light as of some intense happiness glowed in her face for an instant, though it darkened immediately with a deeper sorrow, and she bowed her head and wept bitterly again. So have I seen on a drenching, cheerless day in March, the sun shine out for a space with more than summer splendour, ere the black clouds sweep once more across the sky, to break in gusts and storms and pelting pitiless rain.

Of course I was wrong. Of course I ought not to have spoken a word of kindness or sympathy or comfort, but to have stood by and looked on in pious reprobation, pointing to the grave of the dead sinner, and insisting on his fate as a warning, yet more to crush the living loving heart that was left. I cannot justify myself. I confess my error. I do not defend it. I was weak, I was foolish, I was sinful; still, I could not have done otherwise. God help me! Even at threescore years and ten a man's heart is something less hard than the nether millstone. No, I do not regret it. She listened so much more calmly after that. I told her how I had found him. She spared me no details. Where was he sitting?—what was he doing?—how was he dressed?—was he writing?—had he got her letter?—was he in the habit of taking that dreadful laudanum? It was so easy to pour out

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a little too much! and he was always so heedless about trifles! Perhaps he took it directly he came in, and before he read his letters? Did I not know? Had I not been able to find out? All these questions hurried out eagerly and breathlessly, while she hung upon the answers as if her life depended on my words. I endeavoured to reassure her as much as possible. Without departing from the truth, I tried to make it clear to her, that she could have had nothing to do with the over-excitement which had driven him to the fatal remedy; that her letter, which I had seen, was calculated to soothe rather than madden him; that it was, in short, one of those judgments of which, as we could never know its exact details, we were bound to accept the least shocking probability. In vain. She always came round to the same ghastly doubt, the same harassing inquiry, *had he done it before or after he read her letter?*

I changed the subject two or three times, inquiring her present prospects and future movements. I learned she had come to stay a few days in a little town five or six miles off, that she was resolved to depart from England forthwith, but that she could not leave without visiting the grave of him who had loved her so dearly, with whom she had once hoped to spend a long and happy life. She had been here last night and the night before. She had a carriage even now waiting for her in the village. She must go away to-morrow, and perhaps she should never have even this melancholy consolation again.

I entreated her to take shelter at the Hall, or elsewhere. I urged upon her that she was killing herself, that the cold and exposure were more than any woman's frame could bear. I even begged of her to order her carriage and return. No "she would not stir from that spot," she said, "till her doubts were satisfied, till she knew whether she had killed him, murdered him, her own—her love—her darling, for whom she would have died, to shield him from the slightest harm."

She was getting wild, incoherent, at last. I feared for her brain. I knew not what to do; I was at my wits' end. Suddenly a new thought seemed to strike her. She gripped my arm fiercely, and her eyes, usually so soft and kind, glared into mine as she asked, in a hoarse, thick whisper—

"What time did he die?"

I told her I had myself picked his watch up from the floor, and it had stopped at half-past nine.

The whole face softened into more than earthly beauty,

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breaking into such a smile as it would have made you weep to see.

“Half-past nine!” she repeated, and for the first time that night the voice was Ada’s own.

“Half-past nine! My love—my love! I *knew* you could never leave me without coming to say good-bye!”

CHAPTER XLIX

TOO LATE

TWO years had passed and gone since I had seen Ada Latimer, weeping over the grave of Gilbert Orme—since I had placed her, half stupefied with grief, in the carriage that bore her away from the spot where her heart lay buried with my boy. Two years, with all their changes in the outward world, and their addition to the load we carry, each of us, in our inner life! The weights truly are heavier, and the strength decreases, but the feeble, shortening steps bear us nearer and nearer to the goal. For two years I had not seen nor heard of her, yet was she seldom absent from my thoughts. Sleeping and waking, the sad inquiring face seemed to haunt me still. I was again in London, in the vast city on which time seems to make no impression, and but that a few of the items which constitute its whole had passed away, it was little changed, even to me, from the London of ten, ay, twenty years ago. The new faces in the club windows wore the weary expression of the old ones; the new voices seemed to be as languid and listless as those others, silent now for evermore. Orme, indeed, was forgotten. Charley Wing never came to St. James's Street, and Landless had only succeeded to the only territorial reversion he had been unable to make over to the Jews—the six feet by three to which the humblest of us is an heir of entail; but Flippant was alive still, alive and merry, with a deeper colour than ever, and a darker wig and a brighter smile, the envy of his contemporaries, alternately the butt and the oracle of younger men who were following in his steps. With Flippant, however, and his school I have nothing to do. I am more interested in the prosperity of those whom I connect with my last visit at West Acres, and on their happiness it is my chief pleasure to dwell.

I have seldom been splashed by the wheels of a sociable with such satisfaction to myself, as I was near the corner of Bruton Street, whilst waiting to cross that thoroughfare not

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very long ago. Looking up, I saw on the panel of the carriage a double cipher, in which the letter G was twisted and tortured and multiplied into itself with extraordinary ingenuity, and raising my eyes a few feet farther, they rested upon Lady Gertrude's handsome face, beaming with matronly beauty and content; also on a tiny copy of the same with a huge cockade and a strong dash of John Gordon's resolution about its infant brows. She stopped to show me the son and heir with more than a mother's pride. How she believes in "baby" nobody but the young mother of a first-born can conceive. It is a fine child, doubtless, and a vigorous. Indeed, the poor canary has already fallen a victim to its energetic caresses.

Like its father's, the baby's grasp is not only strong, but tenacious, and too ardent an embrace of the yellow throat left the poor favourite dead on the floor of its cage. Gertrude has read how the sucking Hercules strangled the serpents in his cradle, and is immensely proud of the feat. For the rest, she is thoroughly happy, cannot be brought to a skirmish now, even with Lady Olivia, and thinks there is but one man on earth, and that man is John Gordon. Also they are going to spend the autumn with the Holyheads at their place in Yorkshire. Of the latter couple I have heard a good deal through Mrs. Montpellier. Although she vows she has scarcely forgiven the peer for not giving her the option of refusing him, she expresses herself perfectly satisfied with his choice, and showed much kindness to Bella when mourning the death of her father, an event which postponed her marriage for nearly a twelvemonth. The old alderman has played his last rubber, and died happily enough, in the arms of his dear child. Mrs. Montpellier prospers as she deserves; she has quite overcome the Visigoth faction, and goes to lunch with the inmates of Ormolu House, as if she had known them from childhood. She and Lady Ormolu have become hand and glove about homœopathy, so that Lady Visigoth, though by no means silenced, has been compelled to submit. True to the nature of her kind, she is less rancorous in defeat than victory. Mrs. Montpellier's black eyes sparkle mischievously when they meet. One would hardly think they could ever fill with tears, as they did when she talked to me about poor Gilbert, the last time we were together. It is more than a year ago, and she has, doubtless, forgotten him; there have been moments when I thought in bitterness they have *all* forgotten him now. Even the old retriever howls no longer at the gun-room door; though he persisted for months in that offensive habit, he has left it off at last.

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"Yes," I said to myself in Bruton Street, as Lady Gertrude drove away with her baby in her arms and a merry laugh on her face, "it's the way of the world—the rolling, changing world. I believe I am the only mourner left!"

My heart was heavy as I went to evening church, according to my favourite custom, in a locality where such services are performed on stated weekdays. Though my eyes are dim now, and I am deaf and stupid, and the clergyman's voice is but an indistinct monotonous drone in my ears, I love the dark recesses, and the scattered lights, and the sacred gloom of the place of worship. Above all, I love to mark the triumphant swell of the pealing organ, and the high notes of the choristers, soaring like an echo of angels' voices from the distance of eternity, and the hallowed music that I may humbly hope to hear in another world.

As I listened to the chanting of the evening psalms, I was aware of a voice of peculiar sweetness that joined in the holy melody—a voice that I fancied that I had heard before, that seemed to touch some thrilling chord and wake some painful memory in the depths of my heart, but yet that, strange to say, I did not recognise. Again and again it rose and fell in the beautiful poetry of the inspired minstrel, till, in a verse of touching sorrow, too sacred for me to mention here, it seemed to be cut short with a stifled sob, and I heard it no more during the rest of the service. Though I never imagined she was in England, I was scarcely surprised when Ada Latimer put her arm within mine at the church door, and, adapting her steps to my slow and feeble gait, walked silently and sadly with me up the lamp-lit street.

There was something in her face that forbade me to accost her with commonplace words of greeting and inquiry. It was pale as marble, and the contrast with her black dress in the gaslight was unearthly. Could this be the Ada who was once the very rose of womanhood, the pride and flower of her sex?

After a few steps she spoke. The sweet, low voice had lost none of its music, but there was that in its tone which told of a broken heart.

"I saw you in church," she said; "I waited to speak to you. I have no one to consult—no one to guide or advise me now."

I bade her talk to me as she would to a father.

"I have tried to do right," she said. "Do you think I am justified in remaining in England? I have been to Australia to seek my husband. I can hear nothing of him. There is

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no trace by which I can follow him. I remained at Sydney till my money was nearly exhausted. I can at least get my bread in London, and it is a long, long way from—from where you met me last. Surely there is no harm in my staying here. Indeed I have but one wish, to labour whilst I live, and do all the good that one weak woman can. Night and morning I pray but to know what is required of me. Oh! I want to be so good—so good. It may be”—and her voice sank to a whisper, whilst a shudder swept over her frame—“it may be that his blood is on my head. Shall I have to seek him through all eternity without finding him! Oh! no, no. I believe the Scriptures, and they promise me that ‘the fervent prayer of the righteous availeth much’!”

Trusting even beyond the grave. Hoping, when even hope itself had failed. Ah! could he but have thought as you did, Ada, my boy had been still alive. You would never have met on earth, but Infinite Mercy would have tempered your afflictions here, and to Infinite Mercy you would cheerfully have confided your lot hereafter. Alas for the one who failed at the moment of trial, in his faith! Alas for the proud self-confidence, the reckless spirit, and undisciplined heart! I dare not speculate on its doom, nor argue on the award of unimpeachable justice; nor place a limit to the ransom which has rescued millions on millions of souls for all eternity.

Could I tell Ada Latimer she must leave that hope alone for ever?

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